

喬林 知

Tomo Takabayashi Presents

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7のつく
歌になる!

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角川ビーンズ文庫

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MaruMA:Volume11:Prologue

In my personal opinion, the real Poison Lady, should be the late Lady Susannah Julia von Wincott.

Please consider it, everyone, all you have to do is use a certain method to treat the blood of a Wincott, and you can create an unprecedented, interesting new poison. They are known as the living poison, the moving poison, even the poison capable of falling in love. Ahh, how enviable.

I suddenly had an idea.

How much effort do I need to put in to become a Poison Lady that surpasses even the von Wincott family? Since then I put my entire life into research, research, and more research, but after all I can only study on my own, and that is no easy task. However, the day has finally come for me to show the world the fruits of my labor.

My masterpiece— “The Poison of Sarcasm” can turn the most polluted swamps back into beautiful wetlands. What a beautiful scene that will be: poisonous frogs of a poisonous pink croaking, poisonous fish of a poisonous green swimming in the poisonous swamp, even the flora flourishing by the banks would all be poisonous, this is the epitome of “fighting poison with poison”! When this miraculous day comes, I will naturally be acknowledged by all as the “Poison Lady”.

--Excerpt from As Poison Lady, My Life is Complete, prologue

MaruMA:Volume11:Chapter 1

Chapter 1

The Shibuya's oldest son is completely immersed in typing on his keyboard on the bench in the airport, late at night.

It's a mini machine, about palm-sized. At first it was a simple device for sending mails, but after a hardworking antique dealer's modifications, and over and over again, finally it was upgraded into a pride-worthy miniature PC.

Its name is 'Betsujin 27-go'[\[1\]](#).

As for the original, adorable design, it was long since lost in the modifications.

This 27-go is currently refreshing a secretly-operated bishoujo games research site. Of course now isn't the time to review the latest works, but if it's blogs and BBS, then maybe a few of the regular visitors might have some opinions for reference?

The title of the forum is 'Is there a way to make the Niagara Falls flow backwards?'

Perfect! This way he can probably get useful information from younger-sibling-lovers all over the world... if there is any. Even if he can't get intel, maybe when everyone is discussing their deep thoughts and ideas, Ikkyu-san will come up with something good! Such as asking the Niagara hermit, or something really neat IN Niagara... *etc.*

He might as well post on the military weapon forums he usually goes to as well. To Shouri, this is a time of emergency, so be it bishoujo game enthusiasts or military weapon enthusiasts, they're all people he will ask for help. He even wants to use the judo pincer grip to force them to think.

After all, his only little brother whom he'd adored for sixteen years is currently missing. This isn't something trivial like camping out for no reason, running away from home, or singing songs at the KTV all night, either.

He went missing in another world.

Another world!

It's as though he has some disappearing jutsu, even radars can't find him. Forget radars, all the technology in the world can't help. His precious brother went to the world of swords, magic, and 'Yuu-chan is so moe' and never came back...

Does that RPG stuff really happen!?

Just hearing Yuuri's friend, Murata's words makes it hard to believe. Who'd have thought that there are such imaginative little brats in this world, this sort of person will probably go on to make movies. But after he got confirmation from his old acquaintance, Bob, the believability of it all increased significantly.

That unique American is a family friend since his grandfather's generation, and every time they meet he says some outrageous things. To other people, he's a guy with extremely normal Robert de Niro looks, and a man with an extremely normal platinum English Express card. There's only one thing about him that stands out...

This Mr Bob, is the Maou.

Since the bona fide Maou of the Earth himself said it clearly, then he has no choice but to believe that his little brother is facing some sort of crisis. Besides, Bob even stared at him through those weird sunglasses, so it's really hard to laugh it off as a joke.

"Yuu-chan... poor Yuu-chan."

Baby brother—That high school student whose head is full of only baseball bats, baseballs and baseball gloves, actually went to world 180 degrees different from Earth to be the Maou. His little brain is probably being tortured by things like taxes, annual incomes, economic meltdowns, stock markets... etc, isn't it? After all, his math isn't good.

At any rate he has to fly there as soon as possible and bring his little brother back! If it was a stranger with no connections whatsoever then that's another matter, but he is his older brother, Shouri! How can he just put his head into the spot-billed suck pond and pretend he didn't see anything?

“Those two damned black glasses and white glasses, telling me about Niagara and Fuji, when they themselves actually ran to Haneda Domestic Airport. After talking so much about so many other places, why are there foreigners running to Haneda Domestic Airport now?”

Shibuya Shouri pushes his glasses up with his hand, muttering away. To him, his glasses are already a part of his face, so there’s no problem there.

Bob and Murata are headed to the pride of the Japanese people, Haneda Airport, to meet a man named Rodriguez. He’s a master amongst the Earth mazoku, and has a connection with that world.

Where did that Rodriguez come from? Russia? Korea? Or China?

On the other hand, Shouri, planning to make Niagara flow backwards, is operating along, bringing the brand new passport from ten years ago to Haneda International Airport.

It was past eight at night when he reached Haneda. Although the international flights were still coming and going, but since evening the rain has been getting heavier and heavier. Since there aren’t any passengers who bothered the ladies behind the counters about it yet, so they’re still smiling gracefully.

And right now the only funds he can use are his pathetic student credit card, but at least he can still buy two-way tickets to Oregon. Only, when he was asked, ‘Is Economy class okay?’, all he could do was nod his head obediently in reply. Back then he quietly yelled in his heart, ‘Dammit! I’ll definitely make it rich—’

It’s just that the share he bought last year haven’t earned a single cent until now.

“Excuse me, do you want to be put on the waiting list?”

Since he was lining up with complicated feelings in front of the counter, when he is suddenly told that the flight is full, he really had a feeling of disappointment.

“Is Oregon that popular? Oh, right, now is the autumn tourism season, people always say ‘Autumn Starts in Oregon’^[2], so that’s why it’s full...”

“Mister, if you’re headed for the Niagara Falls, shouldn’t you be going to

Canada?”

“I-I know that. I also know that monkeys will fall from trees, so no matter how capable a person he will still make a mistake someday.”

Shibuya Shouri, who hasn't been embarrassed in public for a long time, is corrected by the smiling lady staff. He doesn't want them to find out that he had allegedly returned here from America. And when he's waiting for a replacement seat, quite a few flights can't take off due to the weather. The passengers who can't get onto their flights fill up the benches, and the hall gets stuffy with their discontent. It's only the end of October in Japan, so they're still very slapdash with the air conditioning.

But everyone doesn't want to go outside either. Thanks to the growing winds, the rain has become a sideways-flying storm. Looking at the gale beating on the glass windows, he just realized that the Kanto area is affected by a hurricane.

There are already people ready to camp out for the night, and other graceful business travelers plan to wait patiently at a nearby hotel. People who can't do either of the above and have a temper to boot, start venting out their frustrations on the staff, so you can hear the travelers' dissatisfied complaints everywhere.

Having successfully updated the web page, Shouri closes his trusty 'Bestujin 27-go'. The guy beside the guy beside the guy beside him is an office worker who can't sit still because he can't take a smoke—he deduced that from the smell of cigarettes on his clothes. If it was that little brother of his who puts health above everything else and hates cigarettes, he probably wouldn't be able to sit quietly for even five minutes.

Just then Shouri plans on playing a little trick, and so he heads for the lounge especially for business class VIPs. The friendly female staff stands beside the PC, waiting for the passengers to come in for a break. He tries to use Bob's name, and doesn't expect it when he's easily let into the VIP lounge.

Thank you, Bob. I thought all you were good for was dressing up sexily with two shells covering your bits in front and dancing the samba, so it never occurred to me that you could come in handy at a place like this.

The VIP lounge and the waiting area where the normal passengers are

squashed together is completely different, this is practically heaven in comparison. In the practical room painted with deep colors, there are many empty and soft sofas that let you sink in them, and the air conditioning is very suitable too. Other than providing coffee, red tea and other non-alcoholic beverages, there is also a complete display of business-related magazines on the racks, though there aren't any newspaper sport sections.

“This is practically a different world!”

In a little booklet just lying around, it even says that they'll give you Shigaraki ware as a souvenir for the flight, but first he must be lucky enough to get onto the plane. Surely the airline will give him a tanuki^[3], right?

Just as Shouri is imagining himself carrying home a silly-looking omnivore as he adds coffee into his pure white coffee cup and prepares to go back to his seat, he sees that there's a girl in the otherwise empty lounge. She's sitting right beside the table where he put his luggage. There are obviously a lot of empty spaces nearby, so why must she choose to sit near Shouri?

But since he was originally sitting there, it would be weird if he suddenly changed seats, so he takes his coffee cup and walks back to her side. Just one look would tell anyone that she's obviously a foreigner. The natural brown hair is tied neatly, and behind those brown brows are a pair of grey-blue eyes filled with laughter. But her clothes are completely Japanese—the almost bright red bottom and the fish embroidered with gold thread, would not only remind people of a Nagoya lady owner, but it would also be received well, wouldn't it? But this is an international airport with a hurricane outside, so no matter how friendly her smile is, people will only treat her as a weird foreigner.

It's still better not to get involved with her. Conservative Shouri sips his coffee, trying to avoid meeting her gaze.

“Hi! How you do--”

“...How you do.”

She really is enthusiastic... What on earth does this foreigner pretending to know Japanese want to do?

“You, geisha--?”

“...No, I’m not.”

“OH! What a pity, might as well commit seppuku.”

She points at her kimono, raises her head and sticks out her chest, saying proudly, “I’m a geisha.”

“No, you probably aren’t.”

“NO—I should definitely be a geisha.”

Tears gather in those grey-blue eyes. Not only has he made a foreigner cry, it’s a tourist younger than him too, so Shouri hurriedly puts down the magazine he was reading.

“Ah—I apologize, ah—sorry. I never went for a geisha’s performance, neither have I seen a real geisha. I’m really very sorry, it was my fault.”

Though more and more Japanese people are going overseas for their vacations, but there aren’t many foreigners who visit Japan. If he left a bad impression of Japan on her, forget her coming back again for a second trip, she might even turn her friends and family anti-Japanese. Didn’t even the governor of Tokyo strongly pledge to make Japan a tourism giant? Even if she’s the clueless heroine of ‘Kill Bill’, since he’s the first Japanese she came into contact with, he’ll have to treat her kindly.

“This geisha outfit is pretty good! Mn... Especially the salmon swimming upstream, it leaves a lasting impression.”

“NO—these are carp. Don’t you know it’s 1000 AD now?”

“...Haha...ahaha... It’s around 2000 AD now.”

He can’t tell at all if she’s joking, or if she’s just that clueless.

Maybe she misunderstands that he accepted her cold joke, because she starts chatting up Shouri enthusiastically. She takes out the passport in her pocket and shows him,

“I’m here during the fall break to play at my Japanese’s friend’s penis^[4]!”

“What!?”

Upon hearing that, Shouri is shocked. How can a young girl say that word in a

public area? And also, which fellow taught her wrong Japanese?

“Hold on a sec, miss. It’s not your friend’s penis, it’s your friend’s place.”

“OH—that’s right. It’s my friend’s place...”

It’s place not penis, just one sound makes a large difference... Defeated, Shouri can’t help but press his brow with three of his fingers.

This world has gone crazy. A young girl can actually say such a crude word so brazenly, what has America come to?

“The other person is my online friend, my online friend, you know—to deepen the exchange between American and Japanese culture, we communicate and help each other out.”

“I really don’t know if I should say, ‘good luck’...”

If what she says is true, then isn’t it a recommendable culture exchange? OH! Japan has really fallen—And it’s not the influence of Japanese English either, but of American Japanese, making people sigh at the loss of the five, seven, five rhythmic beauty of the Japanese language.

“Isn’t your friend coming to meet you? Or are they late ‘cause of the hurricane--”

He really has been affected by her accent.

“NO, NO, NO.”

The girl raises her right hand and waves it in front of her face, symbolizing denial.

“I’m waiting for a man called BOB. Three days before I go to my friend’s penis to play, I plan on first asking him to take me around his New Year’s party—”

“Is that so—”

Shouri reaches out to take the magazine he hadn’t finished reading, and starts checking the chart of last month’s stocks—staring hard at the Euro.

“I hope the Bob you’re talking about is a normal person.”

Once he said that, the two of them fall silent, just staring at the heavy rain outside.

Bob?

“When you say Bob, do you mean that Bob!?”

After blurting out that question, he just realizes how stupid that sounded. Bob is a name you can simply pick off the street, just like a ton of people are called Sanro. Besides, she’s just a tourist who just happened to sit beside him at the airport, so she shouldn’t have any relationship with that Bob.

“Which BOB do you mean by BOB?”

The blue-eyed girl who claims to be a geisha asks back in fluent English.

“He’s a bespectacled, sunglasses-wearing cocky old uncle.”

“Then it can’t be the same person, the BOB I know isn’t cocky at all. The cheerful, open Uncle BOB I know is too HIGH Robert de Niro!”

“Robert de Niro? What a coincidence, the Bob I’m talking about looks a lot like him too, maybe they’re even CLONES.”

“Eh? Your friend is a CLOWN? Your English sucks. Now even kindergarten brats don’t talk like that.”

W...w..w..w..what happened to your Japanese^[5]!?

Shouri swallows his urge to yell, gripping his fists tightly on his knees. Shouri, you have to bear with it, at times like this you must bear with it. The person whose teacher wrote ‘bad temper’ on the family contact book isn’t him, it was his younger brother.

“Technically, it shouldn’t be that BOB looks like Robert de Niro, but de Niro who looks like BOB. Because the BOB I’m waiting for has been wearing those sunglasses and sporting that hairstyle for a very, very long time, since even my great grandmother’s time!”

“From your great grandmother’s...”

“That’s right, weird, isn’t it? Just like a monster, right? And he even says half-jokingly that he’s the Maou!”

Shouri suddenly bangs the table top with his fist, and the coffee cup makes a sharp sound.

“What’s his name!?”

The Boston native in the kimono looks surprised, and then she says in her weird accented Japanese,

“Name? Oh~ My name is Abigail Graves.”

“Not your name, I meant Bob’s full name!”

Very few people can say the Maou of the Earth’s full name.

1. [Jump up ↑](#) Reference to an old mecha anime, Tetsujin 28-go. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetsujin_28-go)

2. [Jump up ↑](#)

Reference to a Japanese movie called ‘Love Begins in Oregon’?

3. [Jump up ↑](#) Shigaraki is home to one of the ‘Six Old Kilns’, and is famous for their ceramic tanuki. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shigaraki_ware)
4. [Jump up ↑](#)

Abigail says: "tomodachinko" friend's penis. Tomodachi: friend; chinko: penis. Shouri says: it's not "tomodachinko", you probably mean "tomodachinchi" (友達ん家), which means friend's place. But tomodachinchi is one "n" short of "tomodachinchin" which is also "friend's penis".

5. [Jump up ↑](#)

Abigail's Japanese suddenly improves to the level of a native speaker.

MaruMA:Volume11:Chapter 2

Chapter 2

It feels like riding a see-saw.

The violent shaking tilts the entire floorboard, after crashing into the right-side wall, now they're knocking into the left side, everyone's trying their best to maintain their balance. I, too, am holding the girl we brought out from the bottom of the ship. I want to cushion her as best as I can, after all I still have some muscle on me, while she's so thin her bones might just break with a 'snap'!

"This feeling is like 'that'... the FLYING PIRATES at the theme park!"

"What FLYING PANTS... What a naughty young man you are, still thinking perverted thoughts at a time like this."

"Don't try to show off your half-baked translating skills... Ow! I bit my tongue."

As the man at the helm makes a sudden, short sound, the girl in my arms instantly holds her breath—maybe in their language, that sound is a sort of insult?

Not long ago this ship was handed to the shinzoku man we brought out from the bottom of the ship to steer—that is, one of the 'slaves who got shipwrecked near Shou Shimaron', according to Saralegui. The way I see it, they're refugees who abandoned their home country, but to someone who was educated since young to become a king, they're no more than 'slaves'.

No matter what the truth is, now isn't the time to be arguing about it. After all when faced with a life-death situation, anyone who can do anything must play their part. Since he's an experienced sailor who's traversed these waters before, then he must be more reliable than a new rookie.

To Sara, he's just a slave; but to me, he's someone who can lend me a hand.

"Can we possibly survive this storm?"

“From the day I was born, I’ve always felt like I’m living in the vast ocean. I’m the Girl on the Sea, Gurrier... Whoa!”

“Waa—Sorry! I accidentally hit your chest.”

“He... Hehe... Young Master, what a powerful hit that was!”

Is it just me, or are there tears in Josak’s eyes?

“But with such bad turbulence, even people other than Wolf would find it hard, right? I don’t usually get seasick, but now my stomach’s all bloated, and I feel like I’m going to vo-vo-vo-vomit—Mph!”

Before tragedy can strike, I clasp my hand over my mouth, my throat full of bitterness. Thank goodness I didn’t just eat. Just then the girl leaves my arms, reaching her hand out to the navigation map on the wet floorboards. The Shou Shimaron crewmen, huddled together and shivering uncontrollably, see her action and follow suit, because they want to know our current location no matter what.

She uses her weak fingers, with those slightly protruding joints and worn-out fingernails to point at a spot on the simple map. While trying to keep our balance, we crawl over to look. On the map full of waves there’s a fish surfacing from the sea. Quite a few simple markers are connected, circling a continent.

Could that be the ocean borders?

The girl knocks the soaking wet map twice and then uses the same finger to point directly out of the helms room. Outside the window, in the direction she’s pointing, we can see different colored waves.”

“...It’s over there.”

When the Shou Shimaron crewmen, Josak and I look at the surprising phenomena outside the window, we all can’t help but gasp.

That’s the ocean borderline. I have no idea what magic nature used, but there’s actually a clear borderline on the surface of the sea. The cargo ship is right now on the heavy grey water, and beyond that line is a bright, light green.

“So the dangerous waters end there? So beautiful, and so clear... Who would’ve thought that the sea was so miraculous!”

The girl's golden eyes are trained on me. But because of the language barrier, I really can't answer her, even though I do feel her suspicions.

"The waves on those waters are really stable, maybe we can reach Seisakoku like that... Wait a sec, how far away is it from there? It's so hard to gauge distances on the sea! Mn—About two hundred meters?"

"Young Master, I don't know how long one of your meters is, but I'm sure it's not so close by! Because there aren't any obstructions on the sea, that's why it looks really near. But the way I see it, it must be at fifty boats away, right? If it's the land even beyond that... Mn—About three times that distance? But that depends on the accuracy of the map, too."

Although I don't know how long a standard boat is, but it shouldn't be just two or three meters, should it? Just this cargo ship I saw on the deck, from stern to bow it was 90 meters, if we use a number that's easier to count:

"100 meters x 50 ships... That's 5000 meters... Is it really that far!?"

And land is even further than that, since the target is big enough, so if I squint a little I can still see it, but it's anything but nearby.

"After all we're on the boat, even if we don't ask how many knots we're going at, as long as we get past this obstacle here, and set sail for the calm seas, perhaps we could even reach there by nightfall."

Just then the shoulder that was always leaning on me suddenly moves, and the girl crawls towards her male companion. The two of them yell at each other a few times, pointing at me and saying something I have no clue about. The shinzoku man holding the ship's wheel turns his head aside, his expression careful and wary, his golden eyes peeking my way now and again.

It's very obvious that he doesn't trust me.

I can't blame him, because to them, I'm a friend of the Shou Shimaron king. They were determined to escape even if it cost them their lives, but now they're forcefully being deported back by Saralegui, so there's no way they'll let their guard down even a tiny bit around me, the king's friend.

"Boat!"

“What?”

The girl suddenly turns back and grabs my hand, even saying a word I understand. Maybe she remembers a few commonly-used nouns?

“Boat!”

She says it again, pointing behind me with her finger. I can’t tell if she’s pointing at the vast ocean behind me, or calling Sazae-san’s mother^[1].

“What about the boat? Surely you’re not asking us to turn back now... Ah! Don’t tell me you guys want to take over this cargo ship, like those hijacking sailor-uniform pirates!?”

The girl must have felt my alarm, because she quickly shakes her head sadly in denial. I never thought that not being able to communicate could be so nerve-wracking. I hurriedly look around me, and see the Shou Shimaron’s ace helmsman has a cylindrical object that looks like stationary in his front pocket, so I quickly ask and take it, drawing a small ‘?’ on the side of the wet map. But, I don’t think Earth’s symbols can be used to communicate here either.

“...Boat...”

Taking the stationary that looks like a pen, the girl draws a human-figure on top of the ‘?’, and draws five of them lined up, then she draws a triangular container underneath them. Judging by the size, it’s more of a rowboat than an actual ship. And then she draws the same thing again, and before the ink on the lines spreads, she quickly presses the finger that was on the human-figures back to her chest, as though saying ‘this is me’. A little distance away, she draws a large triangle, and this time she points at me and Josak. Those golden eyes stare straight at us, desperately trying to get the message across.

“Sorry, I’m not really...”

“I know!”

Josak, who was watching quietly, smacks his chin with his fist.

“She wants a lifeboat!”

“What? Lifeboat? Oh—that’s it, I was wondering why that boat is so small, turns out it’s a lifeboat. Then, this big one is the cargo ship... Then, what you

mean is you want me to let you guys escape on a lifeboat?"

I have no idea if she understood me or not, but she's nodding her head, hard.

"It's already come to this, so why do you still want to escape? Your own country is right there!"

"Seems like Your Majesty guessed it."

Maybe it's because the rocking has gotten slightly more stable, so the spy leaves my side, saying,

"They... and those people underneath the boat, they should be the same. They may be trying to say that, rather than returning to their home country, they'd rather brave the stormy seas, right? Even if they have to ride on a tiny boat that might capsize at any moment."

"Eh!? Wait, you guys plan on going back? Stop joking! How can a small lifeboat cross such a scary and rapid current! Won't you be just like a leaf bobbing on the surface of the vast, turbulent ocean?"

I stand up from beside the navigation map, staring at the skinny girl,

"About that, I'm not trying to curse you or anything. Why don't you land on Seisakoku first, then do your preparations before challenging the seas again? If the king there or Saralegui object, then even if my power isn't much, I'll still put in a word for you."

The man at the helm shakes his beard, yelling over here. The girl raises her right hand to stop him, shaking her head slowly, so we can tell that she more or less understands my suggestion, only to reject it instantly.

"Why? Do you think I'm so unreliable? Do I look like a man who doesn't keep his word? Josak, say something for me!"

"Me?"

The usually cheerful spy grabs his orange hair, looking as though he wants to bluff his way through. Water drips from his biceps.

"What a bother... Young Master, I just can't! What do you want me to say? If you want me to tell these people who came out here with their lives on the line to go back to that place filled with nightmares, I just can't say it."

“Filled with nightmares...”

“Since they abandoned the home they grew up in, they must surely have their reasons, so I really can’t think of anything to say that can persuade them. Even though I have to obey whatever orders Your Majesty gives me, this is a bit too much!”

Maybe he’s remembering his own experiences, because Josak can’t help but frown and sigh. He who suffered because of his mazoku bloodline, also experienced escaping from Shimaron to Shin Makoku before. Maybe that’s why he feels this way?

Even so, I can’t accept her request. Even if I help these shinzoku leave, like she hopes I will, it’s simply impossible to cross the stormy seas in that little boat. Even if Lady Luck smiles on them, their chances of survival are practically zero.

“Speaking of which, how many lifeboats do we have? F-four?”

The Shou Shimaron crewman raises four fingers, even if they can squeeze in thirty adults, it’s still far away from the number of shinzoku we have.

“No matter how you squeeze it’ll still be overloaded, right? When I saw you guys at the Saralegui War Port, I already thought you guys were squished so tight... Hey, wait a sec... speaking of your people...”

The images from several dozen days ago appear in my mind suddenly, that time when ‘Friends on the Sea’ saved two shinzoku children. Shinzoku of all ages squeezed onto a tiny, sinking boat. The adults who aren’t holding little children, desperately waving their arms; tiny children grabbing onto their parent’s or sibling’s knees to prevent being tossed into the sea by the waves. It’s nothing short of a miracle that a boat like that, which could fall apart at any moment, managed to make it all the way to the Shimaron continent. After finding out about the conditions of the Seisakoku waters, I finally understand what a dangerous thing that was. But there’s something bothering me: exactly how many people are stuffed into this boat?

“How many companions do you have down there? No matter how I look at it, it seems there are even more than those seeking for help at the port... And...”

I desperately recall the heavy atmosphere underneath the boat. Though

there's oxygen there, it's also filled with the suffocating smell of seawater. There wasn't any talking, or any babies crying.

"What about the children? Where did the children go? That's weird, just too weird. Although I saw less people at the port, but then there were adults, children, and babies. Technically there should be kids like Zeda and Zisha, who are younger than you. Where did all those kids go? There's obviously more than twice the number of people here, but not a single child, so what on earth is happening here!?"

"Uhm..."

The ace helmsman whose pen was taken away raises his gaze, timidly trying to interrupt. In that instant when our gazes meet, he immediately shirks away, saying in a tiny voice completely unlike a sea man,

"I think—I think the children are probably under our military's custody."

"Military custody? Do you mean rescue? Doesn't Saralegui think he's rescuing the passengers of a shipwreck? That's why he wants to send them back to their home country! It's just that I can't forgive him for treating them as slaves, and using such a horrible attitude too. And the truth is just like I anticipated too, they weren't shipwrecked, they're real refugees."

"That's why King Saralegui sends the useless adults and old people back every year. Because once they're around this girl's age, it gets easy to tell their worth as a shinzoku."

Worth?

The youngest-looking guy on the ship, holding the ace helmsman's left arm, has an expression that says 'any citizen of Shou Shimaron would know something like that!' as he continues,

"Amongst the shinzoku, there are people with powerful houryoku and people with no houryoku. Anyone who's around this girl's age and still doesn't know how to use houjutsu is a useless shinzoku. Maybe if they put in more effort like us humans, they may still be of use someday, but they would still be worthless as shinzoku. To be blunt, they're trash, bottom-feeders. After all, all those guys are good for is their powerful houryoku. If they don't know how to use houjutsu, and

can only plainly work hard, they'll be sent to the mines under the shelter. That's all the use they have."

"What a horrible way to think."

"Eh!? P-please, forgive me!"

It could be that I unconsciously frowned. Although he apologizes, he doesn't seem to plan on shutting up any time soon.

"And these years a lot of people end up adrift on the sea, so now it's supply over demand. After all, even slaves have to eat and sleep, so now that we're suddenly stuck with so much trash we can't sell off, what'll we do if they eat us to bankruptcy? That's why we took this chance to gather them all up and send them back as local produce, but babies and brats... children are different!"

The crewman's tone is getting harsher and harsher, and, the girl's shoulders start shaking, her hands pressed on the navigation map. Technically she shouldn't understand what we're saying, but she lowers her head, biting her lip. The young man doesn't notice her appearance at all, and even swings his ponytail forcefully.

"Children and babies have unlimited potential! So as long the refugees who drift over have kids, the military will take all of them under custody."

"You say custody... for what? Are you going to adopt them and educate them, or give them tests?"

"Adopt? Im—po—ssi—ble—"

The star helmsman nudges his subordinate, who's laughing and waving his right arm, maybe he's nervous over his too-casual attitude? But the young man only frowns, unhappy with his boss rough actions, and continues carelessly,

"Of course we'll sell them!"

"Sell. Them?"

"That's right. Sell them to the merchants while they're still babies, then increase their hourlyoku and teach them houjutsu then sell them to the armies of other countries! And they can be sold for a high price too! Of course that's after we, the Shou Shimaron army, choose the best of them for our ranks."

The young crewman continues ranting, “It’s just that recently there’s been too much brain drain, a few of the excellent teachers and trainers were headhunted to the other countries—previously when shinzoku were mentioned, then they must have been trained by Shou Shimaron; ironically, I heard that we’ve even started importing them recently—”, but my brain is desperately trying to process those completely unreal words.

When I heard about the slaves from Saralegui back then, I should have thought something like this would happen. Shou Shimaron is selling those drifting shinzoku as ‘stock’. Come to think of it, the shinzoku twins I met in the plains—Jason and Freddy are also like that. So they’re probably the so-called strong houjutsu users, that’s why Nigel Weizs Maxine bought them and started dragging them around with him?

They left their country when they were just babies, and were raised with a so-called education, so they have no clue at all about their hometown. They obviously don’t know a thing about Seisakoku, and yet they cried, saying that they wanted to go back.

“But, after these trash shinzoku are deported back, forget their original lives as slaves, they’ll probably be treated even worse, as deserters! Considering that, no wonder they don’t mind a precarious lifeboat, and just want to escape no matter what...”

“You guys... are so horrible!”

The horrible one is me, I never learned my lesson, and still can’t control my temper.

Maybe he’s shocked by the words I say and the sound of something hitting the floorboard, because the young Shou Shimaron crewman’s brown eyes go wide with fear.

“How can you say it so confidently, that’s human trafficking, you know!? That’s a crime, and it’s something a human shouldn’t do, right!? Has no one scolded you? Not one?”

“Your Majesty, you mean...”

Seeing his subordinate shocked into stillness by my furious expression, the

elderly star helmsman replies in their stead,

“But they are slaves.”

“You guy, all you say is slaves, slaves, slaves! You’re adults who should have gotten your moral education, don’t you think saying something like that is embarrassing!?”

He replies, looking confused,

“To us, that’s a matter of fact.”

“Matter of fact?”

“He’s completely right, Your Majesty.”

Josak, who previously kept his silence, says in a lecturing tone behind me,

“Since you guys already know it, then stop doing it. After all if no one pointed out if what you’re doing is right or wrong, you yourselves won’t notice it. Like me, I used to think that I’m just like cattle or horses, nothing more than livestock. Until a certain someone reminded me, only then did I change that way of thinking.”

“But Josak, this is human trafficking! It’s really... it’s really a crime. From a humane point of view, how can this be treated as a matter of fact!?”

“It’s true!”

The elderly helmsman interrupts. Only he uses a voice so small it’s barely audible. His cheeks, blown to redness by the sea wind, are trembling, but I don’t understand why.

“It’s a matter of fact. We think... of them as slaves, as living creatures beneath us.”

“So you guys don’t care at all, and just treat them as stock?”

This last minute excuse, heats me up from the bottom of my throat.

Even if I scold the crap out of a couple Shou Shimaron people here, there won’t possibly be a change in the situation. Even if I take out my anger on the people in front of me now, all it’d do is show how petty I am. I keep trying to convince myself in my head, ‘now isn’t the time to be driven by emotions’, but

still things don't go according to plan.

"Hmph! You don't judge a person by hitting percentage and defending percentage, but by their worth as a person. I really don't understand what kind of basis do you have for judging! I hope you really must tell me. Just take him as an example..."

The shinzoku man gripping the wheel tightly opens his eyes wide when I suddenly point at him, and shirks away timidly.

"Take him for an example. He has an ability none of you experienced seamen have, he can navigate these evil seas. But you treat him as inferior to Shimaron people, keeping him in the bottom of the ship and putting a price tag on him to sell, deporting him if he can't be sold. I really don't get it, I don't understand at all, how on earth is he inferior to you? Please explain!"

If I was in Japan living a normal life, I would never have considered anything like this. Anything about slave merchants, buying people just like ourselves with money, that stuff only happens in history books or countries far, far away.

But, right now it's happening right in front of my eyes.

I still have the blood letter from Jason and Freddy in my pocket. Right before me are people desperate to leave the land they grew on, and would rather dive into the terrifying waters than go back.

Is Seisakoku hell?

To them, is it a terrifying place that is meaningless to return to?

And I actually sent two young girls back to such a terrifying place?

It's not an easy task, trying to calm down the anger that suddenly hit boiling point. But afterwards, those rash emotions turn to self-loathing.

"Damn, if that's so, of course they wouldn't want to go back."

I raise my cold hand up to press my forehead, my entire body slumping down to sit on the wet floor boards. The girl, probably thinking I'm not feeling well, holds my left hand with her thin fingers. Those thin and pale fingers, without much flesh and mostly joints. I suddenly remember the fact that, just a few weeks ago, I got a girlfriend in Japan—

At Murata's high school festival, that school where everyone aims for college, I just happened to meet Hashimoto, who graduated from the same middle high as me. Though her hands had callouses from holding tennis rackets, but they're obviously warmer and softer than this girl in front of me right now.

They're obviously girls of the same age, but there's such a big difference in the feel of their hands.

"Thank you, I'm fine."

The little bit of heat I feel from that slight skin contact, makes me feel a gentleness I can't put to words. Even after she was treated so inhumanely, she still worries about my health.

"...I'm fine, and I'll never take you back to that place."

Just then the crewmen suddenly look up in shock, and then they take off for the cabin door just like that. But before they can make their move, a certain someone immediately kicks the wet floorboards, making a sound.

"Mph-EEK!"

"All right~ Don't panic, don't panic—"

The spy with the superfast reflexes raises the corners of his lips, and quickly uses his feet to keep the control room door shut, his stance saying clearly that before this is all sorted out, no one's to leave the room. Having given up reporting to Saralegui, the star helmsman speaks up decisively,

"You want to give the lifeboats to these people?"

"Unfortunately, star helmsman, I don't plan to do that at all! How can such a tiny boat cross such a dangerous stretch of sea?"

Come to think of it, just the fact that the worn-out boat Zeta and Zuusha rode could make it to Shou Shimaron is a miracle of miracles. If they didn't just happen to meet the current's stable period, many people would surely have died.

How can I let something like that happen in front of me?

As I contemplate, Josak says from above my head,

“If we want to send them off on a larger boat... Then all we can do is give this cargo boat to them. But that white and fluffy boy king would never stay quiet about this. Ah! That’s right.

“We’ll just say that these shinzoku are rebelling! And then they threaten the owner of this cargo ship, planning to chase us away. As for the role of the hostage, leave it to me!”

I try imagining those skinny shinzoku, pinning the healthy soldier in the long-sleeved apron from behind so he can’t move his arms. No matter how you look at it, this hostage looks unnatural. Even if a dozen of them attack at once, I don’t think they’d be a match for Josak.

To be nice, you could say that man is gentle, to put it bluntly he has no aura at all. It could be because they were imprisoned under such horrible conditions, but even if you provoke them, they would never have the guts to rebel.

“Mn—To call them pacifists doesn’t feel right either. No, wait, Gurrier. Never do something as dangerous as inciting a rebellion. Whatever happens, we must make sure this is a bloodless battlefield, a bloodless boat...”

Just then I glance out of the window, seeing the border on the surface of the sea as clearly as though it was drawn on with a pen, If we can just make it past that line to the area of the sea where the color is darker, we can probably make it to Seisakoku easily. By then, it’s okay even if we’re on small boats.

Even if we’re on lifeboats.

“Josak.”

“What is it, Young Master?”

“Later I’ll be saying some very scary lies, don’t look down on me.”

“What do you mean, look down on you, you’re over-exaggerating again.”

He keeps his long legs pressed against the door, his arms crossed in front of his chest, even flexing those gorgeously-lined biceps underneath the long-sleeved white apron—the body of an outer fieldsman that deeply mesmerizes me.

“Lies and disguise are the essence of the intelligence sector, you know! They’re Gurie’s fa~vorite! But if it’s coming from the Young Master, then in the eyes of

an experienced intelligence officer like me, it wouldn't even count as a lie!"

Although this has nothing to do with disguise at all, I'm not so naïve as to believe the words of a person who's supposed to protect me.

"No, I think it's a lie. For all you know, it's an evil lie that may lead to life and death.

At first I wanted to put my arms in front of my chest, but at the last minute I bring them to my forehead, because if I didn't do that, I would laugh out loud from the embarrassment.

"What a bother, I'll steal something later too! Looks like you really can't underestimate the old sayings(1). I'm horrible, huh, a king who lies."

"Mn—You shouldn't blame yourself so much anymore. Besides, Gurrie has recently been working with silent, stoic superiors, so..."

The loyal Shin Makoku spy cracks his knuckles as he looks at the Shou Shimaron crewmen, the dangerous expression of spotting a prey and being so happy he's shaking on his face.

"...I'm just in the mood to show off my acting skills."

The lower half of the captain's quarter door has decolorized due to the beating of the waves.

I knock the wooden door lightly with my fists, opening it without waiting for a reply. The quick crewmen have already started running up and down the stairs leading from the deck to the cabins.

"It's bad! Sa..."

"Yuuri, what's up..."

Saralegui turns around, holding two shiny things, and there are lots of clothes on the bed. Colorful cloth sticks out of the suitcases by his feet, too.

Seeing this overly peaceful scene, my legs can't help but go weak.

"In an emergency situation like this, what are you doing now?"

"What am I doing? I'm matching outfits, of course! After all we're meeting the king of Seisakoku, so we can't wear salty-smelling travelling clothes, right? Oh

yeah, Yuuri should choose a suit from here as well. If you don't mind, you can take them all! Right, Lord Weller, help me take that suitcase over there."

Lord Weller is standing in the corner of the room that is not wide by any standards, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open. There are pale-colored shirt hanging on his arms, making him a living clothes rack, as ridiculous as they come. No—I have no right to insult someone else's guard.

"Matching what outfits... Please, it's not like we're going to a ball!"

Scolded by me, Saralegui looks a little agitated too.

"But Yuuri, it's very important to leave a good impression, right? Although a young kid like me doesn't have the pride of a king, but at the very least I have to pretend a bit on the outside, then I can overpower him by my presence!"

"That's true, but..."

First impressions are indeed very important. Hearing Saralegui, who received kingly training, say so, even I have to deeply agree. But after glancing around, I realize that the official clothes he brought are all either shiny pieces of jewelry, or light floaty lace. If you put them on me, who's only fit for school uniforms and sports clothes, forget the saying 'people wear clothes, the Buddha wears gold', it's practically 'the monkey wearing new clothes'!

"I'll pass, thanks for offering."

"Don't say that, or do you want me to help you choose? Ah, but those black clothes still fit you best! Although people have been telling me that black is an evil and ominous color since I was a child, but my impression of it has changed completely since I met Yuuri! Or maybe it's because those clothes were specially designed for a special someone?"

But in my current high school, there are almost 400 people wearing the same clothes.

"The waves have finally calmed down, looks like we should reach shore in less than a day now! We've already passed the dangerous area, right?"

Seeing the way he tilts his slender chin, saying, 'Are you here to inform me of that?', I finally have a chance to cut to the chase, my mind automatically raising

my hand.

“Sara, now isn’t the time to be picking clothes! Forget about all that for now, let’s escape from here!”

“Escape? Why?”

That golden hair so pale it’s almost translucent falls on those slender shoulders, the neatly-manicured pink fingertips pushing up the pale-colored lenses.

“Have the slaves done something?”

At first he didn’t believe something like that was possible, but after zero point something seconds, his expression becomes extremely uneasy. That odd moment that I suddenly notice makes me want to frown, but I desperately hold myself in check.

But what was that split second change? This is the boy king Saralegui, who ruled the country since he was only seventeen and has kept on bravely, working hard to this day. His stand is very similar to mine, so I believe we can share our deepest frustrations, making him a friend that I can relax with, is around the same age as me, and a person fated to be king.

But I seem to have glimpsed another side of him.

“Could it be, they rebelled!?”

“No, it’s not that. This has nothing to do with the shinzoku, it’s the boat, the boat! Sara, listen to me, c-c-calm down and listen to me!”

I suddenly sort of wish he would retort, ‘You should calm yourself down first.’

Josak is yelling not far behind me, his character not only looking concerned for my safety, but also fanning the flames of agitation, causing the other crewmen to feel uneasy. Right now I can only put in more effort myself.

“The star helmsman reported to the captain, saying that this boat is in great danger, it’s gonna sink! You heard the creaking sounds, right? According to the guy in charge of the luggage, there are already quite a few leaks in the bottom of the boat. Looks like this normal cargo boat can’t cope with a dangerous current like that after all.”

Saralegui pushes aside the hair on his face with a finger, quieting down and listening intently. The ruckus on the deck disappears immediately, leaving only the sound of wooden boards creaking.

“Do you hear that? The boat’s sinking, you know!? I heard that if it goes on like this, in another ten minutes it’ll snap in half! So we have to escape from this boat as soon as possible! If you think you share a fate with this cargo boat, then that’s another matter. No matter what, stop picking clothes, you just have to bring the precious, necessary stuff!”

“But Yuuri, you say you want to escape, how do we... escape?”

“Aren’t there lifeboats onboard!? There shouldn’t be too many people, right?”

I run past the door into the room, flipping over the king’s suitcase. All the bright and beautiful cloths scatter onto the ground, and are replaced by what looks like coats and carpets--At a time like this, I’ll just use force.

“Yuuri, what are you doing!?”

“In weather like this we should take insulating clothes, and we have to make sure we’re not splashed on by the waves. If we throw away the things in the suitcase, we can even use it as a lifebuoy... Hurry, Sara, don’t just stand there!”

The boy who was trained as a noble since young seems clueless, so right now I’m rather grateful that I was born in a normal household.

“I’ve never ridden that kind of tiny boat!”

“Relax! Not only have I ridden inflatable rafts, I even experienced sitting in a swan boat ride with two grown men.”

“What to do? Young Master. Do you need me to lift the weak king, too?”

Holding the captain, who’s foaming at the mouth, by the neck, Josak runs in to ask, lifting him instead of dragging him on the ground. The voice is coming from not far behind me, so even if I walk in front, he can still reach me with his arms.

“It’s okay, there are no problems here on my side. We have to get everyone ready to abandon ship. Saralegui, we can’t always stay on a sinking ship, we still have to get to Seisakoku, right?”

“But Yuuri, what about the gifts and... those slaves? There’s no time now to

move all the cargo to the lifeboats, right?”

“We leave them all here.”

In that instant a shadow seemed to flit past those eyes, hidden underneath pale-colored glasses. At first I thought he was surprised, but then Saralegui lifts his head, smiling slightly. I, on the other hand, speak stutteringly, though I just desperately practiced these lines a while ago.

“Although th-they’re very pitiful, b-but we have choice. After all, slaves... Saralegui. The situation is dire, right now...”

My mouth feels so tight, but I still hide it as best as I can.

“...C-compared to s-slaves, of course we should consider our own lives first. I pity them, and thought we could at least take the women and children with us... I tried to convince them, but I don’t know if they understand me, because not a single person was willing to come up with us. We can’t do anything anymore, so we just have to leave them here. All that’s left is for them to pray to God.”

“Mn!”

The slender chin moves back lightly, and Saralegui nods his head twice in satisfaction.

“Mn. Yuuri, you’re perfectly right. They’re slaves, this is their fate since they were born. You don’t have to worry about them, that’s what they mean by ‘each to their own destiny’.”

“Your Majesty Saralegui, although this has nothing to do with me...”

Lord Weller, who was previously quiet, suddenly clears his throat interrupting our conversation, and tossing aside the sparkling clothes on his arms. His expression is neither worried nor surprised.

“Since this lord has spoken as such, it seems best to leave as soon as possible.”

“See, even your lackey says so, it’s better to listen to your bodyguard’s suggestion, you know! Get onto the lifeboats with the captain. I still need to make a trip to the control room, to tell the helmsman to evacuate!”

After this Lord Weller will retreat with him safely, right? To him, it’d be a big problem if the person he was protecting were to sink into the sea. After saying

those words, I hurriedly turn around and dash towards the deck, because I can't stand that sense of disgust for a moment longer.

I just keep feeling as though, in that room covered with colorful, beautiful clothes, the dirty words from my mouth are still reverberating. As though they're telling me, 'You said those things with your own mouth', making me unable to stay in the same room as Saralegui.

"I hate this--, it's so dirty--! Not a single man will say the truth anyway—"

"Don't say that in such a disgusting voice! The problem is those crewmen who know the whole story. We never offered anything in exchange, neither did we pay for their silence, so how do we keep them quiet?"

"No—problem, it's too easy. As soon as things get tense, we can just sew their lips shut."

"Waa! Just listening to it hurts! Please don't crack any dark jokes at a time like this, you made me imagine that scene!"

Josak immediately moves to my side, teasing me quietly as he follows me, dashing towards the control room currently in battle. The angle of the deck is more stable now, and it's easier to run across it. In fact, the tremors from the people running everywhere in panic is more intense than the beating of the waves. But even if the cargo ship is much more stable now, it's still hard to maintain the right position in these waves, right? This needs a certain set of skills and knowledge. Anyway, right now I need to report the current situation as soon as possible, and then move on to the next stage of the plans, or it'll be too late once the ship really sinks.

My war plan right now is:

Let Saralegui believe that the cargo ship is going to sink, moving all the Shou Shimaron crewmen onto the lifeboats, then using the maximum capacity and language barrier as an excuse, leave all the shinzokus onboard. Sara will follow us on the small boats to sail across the peaceful sea to Seisakoku, and the shinzokus can leave with the cargo ship, to seek refuge at a country other than Shimaron.

"To be honest... this plan is too simple, no one'll fall for it, will they?"

"About that... If it were me, I wouldn't fall for it."

“Ah! I knew it—”

“But if you just want to trick that young king, hasn’t it gone quite smoothly?”

“You mean Sara? Why!? Is it because Sara is more honest than you?”

“Aiya~ Young Master, isn’t that really rude of you? Gurrier-chan is as honest and innocent as a priestess^[2]! However...”

Josak poses like a sophisticated lady, pressing his pointer finger to his lips and raising his head to look upwards.

“Gurrier-chan knows that Young Master is relatively smart, but the other young master is another matter altogether! I think he seems to look down on Young Master a little! If you don’t lie a bit and trick him, he’ll probably step right over you.”

So he thinks that ‘I run really slowly, so I’ll just obediently run home, and won’t steal bases’?

“Hmph! Sometimes I try stealing too^[3].”

The lock on the control room door has been broken, bending at an unnatural angle. I put my hand on it, quietly taking in a deep breath. There’s the smell of the sea breeze in the air.

“Will all the members on this ship please evacuate onto the lifeboats! I have something to request of the helms team--! Please don’t say out what we were discussing in this room... Eh?”

At first there were supposed to be three Shou Shimaron men and two shinzokus, five people in total, but now there are only three figures. Looking around for the other two, I’m surprised to find them on the ground, tied up and bound in hay mats. I just happen to stumble across the oldest star helmsman amongst the Shou Shimaron crew stepping on the younger crewman and tying him up, even carefully gagging him with a cloth. But I don’t ask him what cloth he’s using, to save him some face.

“Eh? Mn—What are you doing?”

Is this internal conflict, or mutiny? Though it seems a bit too small scale.

“Ah, Your Majesty. Forgive me! I let you s-see such an embarrassing thing!”

“No, I should be apologizing. I’m still bothering you at a time like this... what on earth are you doing?”

Hearing someone from another country address me respectfully as Your Majesty made me feel shy, and I had to resist the urge to correct him, ‘Your king should be Saralegui, right?’

“I’m here to ask you to keep a secret... But from the looks of things something came up.”

“Yes. Ah, no... You’re right... Your Majesty from Shin Makoku, we’ve already made up our minds, to live or die with this ship, which is like the life of a seaman. This is our collective wish as a crew.”

“Mm-gaah—”

The star helmsman kicks the bound young man to quiet him down. The thin girl and the man still holding the wheel, on the other hand, are standing and staring with their mouths wide open.

“Please convey this message to His Majesty Saralegui—This cargo ship... is old and worn out, and probably outdated by today’s standards, but it’s still after all an important boat handed to us by the previous king of Shou Shimaron, His Majesty Gilbert. Even if it’s just a small, dirty, broken-up ship in His Majesty Saralegui’s eyes, it’s still an important property of the country. Without the permission of His Majesty Gilbert and the people, we can’t abandon it so easily. So we three helmsman have decided not to abandon ship.”

“Mm-mm-gaa—”

“That’s right, this kid here is also saying, ‘Even if we have to die in these waters, we won’t leave this ship.’ Aiya~ Although his position isn’t high, he still is a seaman at heart, how impressive! Wahaha, wahahaha!”

Perhaps he’s trying to liven up the atmosphere, because the previously completely silent room is suddenly filled with awkward laughter.

The one to sink with the ship should be captain, right? Even I’m not sure if I should correct him.

“Uh—Hold on a sec, star helmsman. You should know that this cargo ship is fine, right?”

“More or less.”

“If so, you should know that right now we don’t need any tear-jerking famous captains, right?”

“I know. That’s why I don’t plan on doing what I said. I just hope you can convey my message to His Majesty Saralegui... Because, Your Majesty...”

The man looks troubled, drooping his eyebrows. He glances at the shinzoku at the helm, and then averts his gaze awkwardly.

“I’m worried that if we just leave them and the people at the bottom of the boat, the same thing might happen again. Even if he has the ability to cross this nightmarish currents, what about the voyage afterwards? Without a decent crew and a detailed navigation map, he might do the same thing as last time, and steer the ship towards Shou Shimaron.”

His fingers are playing with the ropes. It could be just me, but I feel as though even the roots of his ears are red. Looks like seamen are all rather innocent.

“I... That... I just feel that it’s such a waste to send this genius helmsman back to Seisakoku as a slave. Whatever... I’ll just say it honestly, truth is I refuse to admit defeat!”

“Refuse to admit defeat? What’s there to admit?”

The star helmsman stomps down on his subordinate in frustration, even the cracks between his beard turning scarlet.

“His ability—I envy the fact that he has the ability to steer this ship past these waves! As a helmsman, I hope to learn from him. I hope that before I die, I can learn how to traverse those currents safely, the skills to conquer the unconquerable!”

“But aren’t they slaves?”

I know it’s mean to say that now, but I can’t help my expression slowly melting, and continue with my hands on my hips,

“I remember you said that, right? You said that they’re inferior creatures.

Something like that shouldn't have anything worth learning from, right?"

"As expected of the Young Master. Your words really hit the sweet spot~"

Another even meaner line comes from beside me. Only his words inexplicably make my heart feel warmer. As for Josak, who's almost laughing out loud, there isn't any irony in his tone at all.

The Shou Shimaron crewman lowers his head. He's just staring at his fingers, as though some important answer is written there. Being in a hurry, we don't wait for his reply, crossing the room to prepare for the next action. Right then, he finally says in an almost inaudible voice,

"Because..."

"What?"

"We never thought that there are other people with skills and abilities in this world, we never even thought of them as people like us... Because we didn't know, and we didn't want to know."

"Star helmsman."

Aaah~ Right now I'm touched beyond words, but I don't show it, and purposely act calm, patting the old hand helmsman's shoulder. It feels as though the back of this seaman suddenly became so small.

"Since you know that, don't call them slaves anymore..."

"Yes, sir!"

Josak roughly rolls up the paper by the window-side as he nods proudly.

"You fell in love with him, didn't you?"

Even the two shinzokus with their language barriers protest 'No way--!?' at the same time. It's not like that, right? It shouldn't be, and even if it is I don't plan on finding out.

"Now we should leave everything to the two key people who are deeply in love, because we have to go soon. Right! Emergency substitute captain, I found the navigation map for the outer seas! Please read it carefully, and lead these refugees to a suitable place. Mn—To get to Seisakoku we need this map over

here...”

“Listen up, star helmsman, at the very least you need to get to Shou Shimaron... Ah~ that’s right! I don’t know if this is useful to you guys, but...”

I simply grab a piece of paper and start scribbling on the yellowed back. But because the paper was soaked in seawater, it’s tough writing.

“It’d be best if you could get to my country... But you might not have enough food and water supplies. Damn! It’s so hard to write... Whatever, no matter how hard I concentrate, my writing is still horrible anyway. Kaberkott, Sverera, Caloria... Mn, that’s right! Maybe the countries around Shin Makoku can help out too. In any case, as long as you get to a country that’s not under Shimaron rule, even if you can’t land, they will still provide supplies, because I asked beforehand... Here! Although the handwriting is really ugly, at least there’s my signature on it.”

The hastily written essay on the back of a navigation map is just like the slip of paper next to the telephone—bad sentence structures, weird grammar, nothing more than a bunch of nouns. But at least it’s understandable, and there’s my signature too, so ugly no one can copy it. Not only the mazoku, now Mr Hyscliff and Flynn will also lend a hand.

My brain is small, and I can’t store a lot in my memory, so I always thought I could never remember this world’s words. After all, conversing is no problem, so it’s okay even if I can’t read. That’s why I was lazy to practice my writing. But it’s different now, now I’m extremely thankful for Günter, who taught me patiently.

Accepting the soaking wet handwritten letter, the star helmsman stares directly at my face.

“I didn’t think that the mazoku... No, I didn’t think that the other countries have fallen under Your Majesty’s rule without us noticing.”

“Rule? How can I let anyone fall under my rule? Although I’m the king, I’m still just a rookie who just started, who would obey a newbie like me? Oh, yeah, it’s better not to say that just now, my stuff doesn’t matter much.”

I grab the star helmsman’s usual hand, the one holding the ropes.

“You must finish this mission, I now appoint you as the emergency captain of

this refugee ship.”

Holding his hand, I suddenly realize I don’t know his real name.

Speaking of which, Sara’s flagship was called the Golden Salmon. I actually remember the name of a ship I rode for just a few minutes, but not the name of the vessel that carried me on this long journey.

“I’m such an idiot, I actually forgot to ask your name and the name of the ship.”

The corners of the Shou Shimaron man’s mouth and his beard start shaking, and he shake his head gently before grasping my right hand forcefully.

“Your Majesty, this ship is called ‘The Wooden Bear Carving and the Salmon’. As for my name, it’s not important.”

“Well, dammit, you’re too cool! Star captain, I promise you here and now, to remember your deeds, I’ll put a wooden bear carving at the entrance of my house for decoration.”

Truth is there was one there since ten years ago. Not only my house, but my cousin’s and Murata’s living rooms have one too. Looks like this ship was widely loved by the Japanese since ancient times.

“All right, Young Master, since we’ve decided who the new captain is, it’s time for us to scram.”

“Got it!”

Releasing the Shimaron man’s hand, I hold out my right hand to the two shinzoku. The man is still holding the wheel tightly with his stick-thin hands, looking too busy to shake hands with me, but I quickly notice the difference in habits. But even the girl whose golden eyes are filled with tears, has no intention of shaking my hand, maybe because our way of expressing emotion is different than that of Seisakoku?

“Do your best, I’m rooting for you! I’m sorry I couldn’t help much, and really sorry I can’t take you with me, so sorry.”

I really wish she could teach me any formal farewells the shinzoku have, but it’d be too hard to explain.

“I can’t help you any more than this, but your god will definitely follow you. Although I don’t know what kind of god it is, but he’ll definitely protect... Eh?”

The girl suddenly grabs my wrist, and rolls up the kitchen uniform sleeve, then she uses her stick-thin finger to press on it.

“That hurts, that hurts! That really hurts!”

Her fingernail is scratching the inner part of my arm forcefully, and it quickly starts swelling and bleeding. I want to pull my hand back, but she suddenly finds strength from goodness knows where, holding onto me tightly and not letting go. The girl’s fingernails are different from Saralegui’s perfectly manicured ones, worm till they’re round and short, and she uses them to draw lines on my arm. Her lowered chin and slender shoulders are shuddering, up and down.

The long wound becomes a curved line, soon turning into a five centimeter long hexagon, with lines connecting the corners inside to form a star, like a simple diamond sign.

“Venera.”

The girl’s golden eyes are sparkling underneath her long lashes, and she says it again, a smile on her face. Since we met, this is the first time she smiled so brightly, hopeful.

“Find Venera.”

“Tell me! What’s Venera!? Is it a person’s name!?”

“Your Majesty! That riddle might take years to solve.”

The spy rushes me, because we can’t linger any longer. Josak’s decision is right, so I resist the urge to grab her shoulders and shake her wildly. Still, I can’t keep my impulse completely under control, so I hug the girl’s body, so thin it could almost break, tightly.

“Wait for me, next time we’ll definitely meet in my country.”

Although we can’t understand each other, I still feel the girl in my arms seem to nod, though it could just be the shaking of the boat.

After getting onto four separate lifeboats, we wave goodbye to ‘the Wooden

Bear Carving and the Salmon'. The star captain is standing on the helm of the cargo ship far away, waving a yellow handkerchief slowly, looking blissful.

The crewmen who don't know the truth, some of them had tears in their eyes when they heard of the three helmsmen's brave decision, while others tsk-ed and said 'they sure like to act cool'. The captain, in charge of everything, looks cool; Saralegui, who counts as the owner of the ship doesn't seem to have much of an interest in the incident, not glancing back even once.

He seems to have put all his thoughts into reaching Seisakoku, how outgoing of him!

We arrive at the calm waters, where the color of the sea is obviously different, but it's not the same as when we saw it just now either, because now it's been dyed orange-red by the sunset.

Soon the sky will turn dark. Since we're unable to land, all we can do is drift on the little boats like leaves, welcoming the night in a foreign land.

The only thing that's worrying, is that the people on the boats are too densely packed. Over a hundred crewmen are squeezed onto four lifeboats, Josak, Saralegui, Lord Weller and I have to ride on the same boat too-that is the slightly more stable one compared to the other lifeboats, No. 1 steered by the captain.

Even if I'm dressed like a weird chef, I'm still given the royal treatment. To keep me away from the ships filled with young laborers, the captain saved me a spot from the very start. But to me, it's more relaxing to sit amongst a group of straightforward men, and listen to them brag of their achievements.

And Lord Weller, with his arms crossed before his chest, is less than three steps away from me. That's hardly surprising, since he's Saralegui's guard.

Josak's expression isn't pretty. He turns back and looks at the smaller boats behind us, his brow uncharacteristically creased as he says,

"It'd be better to sit on a boat with twenty string men."

"Relax! There's no need to be wound up."

"But Young Master..."

"I won't simply trust anyone anymore."

Touching my left arm through my clothes, the inner part of my arm is slightly warm, but the pale red ring on my dominant right hand is as cold as ice. Who'd have thought that it couldn't even fit on my pinky! When I realize that, that slight pain starts again, and my body starts shivering almost instinctively.

"Are you cold?"

"It's okay."

I wrap the insulating clothing I borrowed around my front. After the sun sets, it's probably going to get even colder, so I can't start complaining already. To look at the last remaining rays of sunlight, to get a little more warmth, I raise my head.

When our eyes meet, Lord Weller says something softly. At first I thought he was just mumbling to himself, but when I connect the parts that I can hear, I realize immediately that those words are aimed for me.



“Not bad, you’re a rather decent actor.”

We've been found out.

He's found out that we worked together to put on a show, now we don't know when he'll report it to Saralegui, so we have to be careful of him.

Because Lord Weller Conrart is my enemy.

1. [Jump up ↑](#) 'Sazae-san' is a character from a long-running comic strip, and her mother's name is a homophone for 'boat'.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sazae-san>)

2. [Jump up ↑](#)

My Chinese raws use the kanji meaning 'priestess', but on a side note the literal meaning of the term in Chinese is 'witch' xD

3. [Jump up ↑](#)

There's an old Japanese, “嘘つきは泥棒のはじまり”, lit. lying is the beginning of stealing.

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Chapter 3

That's enough of these sea descriptions!

Since I'm not a poet, how can I think of pretty words to describe the beauty of the sky, waves and boats! Although Wolfram is very dissatisfied, he's still forced to follow the secret seasickness cure Lord von Christ taught him.

"Two hundred and twenty-one... the beautiful, sea... Mmph! Damn you, Günter, it's not working at all! Two hundred and twenty-two... the mother of all life, the sea. Stupid Günter, just you wait until I get back! I'll put Kiku by your pillow-side every night!"

And he doesn't forget to scold him either.

"I've used everything from my father to my great-grandfather a hundred times by now, right? Then four hundred and twenty-three... The sea, like my granduncle, hai... hahph!"

"Don't you feel like you suddenly have a lot more relatives?"

"That's right, and I'm tired of praising the sea! How can something as useless as this help me on a happy, relaxed oceanic journey! Besides, I didn't volunteer to join the navy, it's only natural that I'd get seasick!"

"Poor Excellency. Your body and your spirit may have grown, but the snails in your ears are exactly the same."

Hearing her commander, who's younger than her, scold her adopted father with all he's worth, not only is Lady von Christ Gisela not angry at all, she even comforts him.

"The snails in my ears? Mm—ph, what is that?"

"Oh dear! Don't you know? Everyone has a snail in their ears. The reason people get seasick, carsick, or dizzy when riding a horse, is because that snail is in a bad mood and throws a tantrum. If it's slightly more serious, it will even bite

away the membrane in your ear canals, and suck up all the owner's brain juices! That way it's not just a matter of vomiting and dizziness, even your brain juices will leak out of your ears!"

Wolfram's expression changes visibly, and he instinctively raises his hands to press on his head, yelling,

"D-don't say such disgusting things! It must be that, what you call folk tales, right?"

Gisela shakes her head with an expression of deep regret,

"No. The mini snail in Your Excellency's ear is scampering around right now."

"Then according to you, what will happen to me now!?"

Wolfram, who never took the medical training courses in the army, definitely has no idea that the Sergeant is best known for her 'unreal medical horror stories'. Facing an innocent reaction that she hasn't seen in a long time, Gisela can't help but smile.

"Actually you don't have to act so tragic about it, all you have to do is cheer it up a bit and you'll be fine. Please temporarily forget your nervousness about this journey, relax your shoulders, and then the snail will calm down too. Why don't you go with that bunch of... No, why don't you try mixing with the crowd, and temporarily forget the worries in your heart?"

Lower down on the deck, some off-duty soldiers are passionately interacting with the Caloria reinforcements. That's putting it nicely, the truth is the cabin door is wide open, and they're having a huge beer party whether or not there's a roof above their heads. And now it seems to have gone past a mild haze, because there are drunks all over the ground. Some are hugging their bottles of beer and lying on the deck, while others are sitting cross-legged on wooden buckets full of pure water and lecturing yet others.

Looking down at this peaceful scene, Wolfram's brow is creased in exactly the same way as his brother.

"A bunch of drunks!"

"Don't tell me you're not good at interacting with uncles?"

“This has nothing to do with age. You see, they’re the humans sent by Caloria, right? But the soldiers on our ship have mixed with them in such an unsightly manner. Unforgivable. It’s so unseemly! They have no self-awareness as mazoku at all!”

Indeed, the men stacked on top of each other on the deck, are not differentiated into mazoku and humans at all. Mixed into a mess like this, the only way to tell them apart is by their outfits. Most of the ones in uniform are mazokus, but some of them are in plain clothes too.

“That guy drunk out of his wits, is it Adalbert?”

“It seems like it... Goodness! He’s hugging the railing and crying! I don’t know whose name he’s calling, but just thinking about it is disgusting. Speaking of which, old boy Grantz was always known for his bad alcohol tolerance.”

“He can’t drink!?”

“That’s right, and there are rumors that he can’t stomach it well either.”

Just imagining the muscleman losing it after a few drinks, makes Wolfram uncomfortable again. Will he uproot a huge tree and start swinging it above his head, knocking down some houses in the process? Or will he break into a small house with livestock, and then grab a horse’s or a cow’s tail... How scary, and so his face gets paler and paler.

As expected of Gisela, not only does she watch Wolfram, who’s imagining a crazy drunk Grantz, expressionlessly, she’s also remembering the rumors on the street about Lord von Bielefeld at the same time. He may look cute, but he has a shocking alcohol tolerance, and he doesn’t go crazy after he gets drunk either, could that be true? She wants to verify the validity of this rumor. Compared to that adopted father of hers, who strips stark naked, wears his underwear on his head and starts dancing madly whenever he drinks, she wonders, who’ll be more fun when they’re drunk?

“So you let him go in a one-on-one battle?”

Adalbert is in such a great mood that his eyes are all narrowed as he raises his hand and waves it wildly in front of his face.

“Amongst the soldiers on the losing side, there was a young man who

obviously looks like a child, but had a very thick beard. His beard was especially weird, so I pulled him out for a closer look—That man was Maxine. I was going to say that his short mustache looks like it was drawn on, but then I realized it really was drawn on with brown colors! He drew a beard on his face!? A fourteen-year-old brat had such a thick mustache, he really beat me there! So I asked him why, and he said, ‘Because it looks cooler like this.’ And his hairstyle was really weird too, because he made this place like this.”

Adalbert puts down the beer bottle, raises both his hands and starts groping around his ears.

“He cropped the whole part upwards! As for the curly hairs that were left, he left them long and tied them into a ponytail, the reason also being, ‘It looks cooler like this.’” Anyway, his look was to draw his beard really thick, and the crop his hair on both sides upwards. Goodness—It was so weird, it made him seem old-fashioned! It made me want to determine if his hair on the lower part of his body is also that thick, and also cropped upwards!”

He flicks his messy blonde hair, laughing loudly. Hearing his vulgar joke and laughter, Dacascos lowers his head in disappointment. Goodness~. The image of the General among the Ten Nobles that the people idolized so much, slowly falling apart before his eyes. Turns out Lord von Christ Günter isn’t the only noble who fell.

“So you guys met under such hilarious circumstances...”

“That’s right, anyway he was laughed at by our entire team to no end, and then, since he was so funny, we decided to open one eye, close one eye, and let him go... Wait a second! Thinking about it, our country is too nice to our prisoners of war, they came all the way across the ocean from another continent, you know! Compared to the way we’re isolated in Shimaron, I can’t help but want to tell him sarcastically, ‘Our prisoners of war practically live in paradise.’ For all you know, a lowly soldier like him would have been happier and more relaxed staying as a prisoner here, than escaping back to his country alone.”

“Should I call him lucky, or unlucky?”

“That’s what’s interesting about him. But what’s even more surprising is that

later when we faced off against Shou Shimaron soldiers again, for some reason all the soldiers had exactly the same beard and hairstyle as Maxine. And regardless of age, too. Maybe they want to get his luck, too. But the truth is the real reason behind it is that his beard is too hilarious, so we generously let him go. If no one said this out loud, no one will know. For all we know, he was idolized as a war god or a hero back home! Aiya—that time we were laughing so hard we couldn't fight!"

"I-is that so—So the reason their entire army crops the hair on both sides upwards, has such a shocking truth behind it... Hehehe—"

Dacascos touches the world's simplest and beautiful head, and then sighs deeply.

"So the legend that man will never die, is partly due to me. Only, Nigel doesn't seem to have any recollection that we met when he was young."

Adalbert grabs the beer bottle Dacascos left beside him and start chugging it down. Since his doctor and his wife restricted him, he hasn't been drunk in a long time.

"Milord really likes them, huh?"

"Huh? Like? Like what?"

"Likes the humans."

The seamen's favorite strong beer seems to be almost burning his throat.

"Your Excellency must really like the humans, huh? Otherwise normal soldiers or someone like me, who doesn't fight, would never hear of the truth behind our superior officers. Mostly they're just slips of the mouth or rumors spreading everywhere, and we can only guess using our imagination. May I ask, Your Excellency, who can be called the descendant of a famous family... Master Adalbert, why on earth would you suddenly abandon our country and follow the humans? Because there are many explanations: Such as someone bought intel about Shin Makoku from you with a large sum of money, or you fell in love with a human girl, everyone can only make such base, old-fashioned guesses..."

Sitting on the deck, Dacascos puts his head between his knees, just like a girl worrying about love. The back of his head and neck are both very red, looks like

he really is drunk.

“You like humans, right?”

“What!? What are you saying? Of course not!”

Having heard a completely unrelated reason, Adalbert is so worked up he waves both hands around wildly.

“You like them, so you don’t want to fight them... It must be that.”

“What are you talking nonsense about!? I hate those mazokus who watched Lady von Wincott die without doing a thing, I want nothing more than to see this cruel country fall to pieces... that’s why I’m using the humans...”

“Recently, I too have been thinking about this.”

Dacascos brings the thin bottle neck to his mouth again, but it’s empty inside, so all he can do is wipe his lips and chin with his fist. The injury he got while working in the kitchen is almost completely healed, but right now it’s pricking painfully.

“Since we were young, we were taught that humans are the enemy, and they must surely hate and fear mazokus too. Even if we’re walking alone on the streets of a neighboring, friendly country, we’ll have rocks thrown at us, so if we head towards faraway Shimaron, we’ll definitely get even worse treatment—that’s something everyone knows. Like when Your Excellency was travelling alone, you must definitely have faced unhappy incidents because of your identity as a mazoku, right? Because mazokus and humans are enemies and we even had a war not long ago, and if we’re not careful we might start another war soon. Because they’re the enemy... probably. Although I only got the most basic education, even my neighbor’s kid knows something like this. But—but, Your Excellency...”

The young king’s face floats into Dacascos’s mind, and just thinking that he isn’t onboard this ship upsets him. Because there are some things he wants to hear from him.

He really wants to ask, ‘But, His Majesty...’

Dacascos puts his chin on his knees, where the bones are clearly visible, and

looks out into the dark and calm sea.

“Please listen to me, recently I suddenly got this idea. It’s just an idea, that maybe they’re all good people.”

Sitting on the ground, Adalbert kicks away the beer bottles and makes a sound.

“Because I was lucky enough to stay by His Majesty’s side, I got to know some humans... like Mr. Hyscliff, Lady Flynn and Mr. Fanfan, they may be humans, but they’re good people! I especially respect Mr. Hyscliff, his shiny head is my target! And Miss Greta may be the princess of Shin Makoku, but she used to be the child of humans, you know! But she’s really cute~. Although my kid is really cute too, just mentioning the young miss makes me remember her cheerful personality!”

Whenever petite little Greta runs past, the dark and gloomy castle corridors seem to lighten up. Whenever she calls His Majesty and His Excellency Wolfram, everyone working in the castle will raise their heads, and smile subconsciously.

“Although they’re humans, they’re all good people. I just can’t figure it out, why are these good people our enemies? Recently it’s bothered me so much my hair is falling out.”

Even Dacascos himself doesn’t know who he should talk about this to. He reaches his hand for his temples where the veins are vaguely showing, and presses them lightly with his fingers.

“But to really get to the bottom of the matter, it could be because we lost friends on the battlefield, and lost brothers in the war. If I ask the Sergeant, Gurrier or Captain Sizemore, I’ll definitely get a more serious answer; but if I ask His Majesty, I’ll get, ‘what are you talking about, Dacascos, isn’t that obvious!’ as an answer, he may even pat my head!”

There’s no other country in this world where the king will pat a low-rank soldier’s head. But His Majesty is just that unique, so much so that we’re changing quickly too.

“Ever since His Majesty appeared, a lot of things have changed.”

Kicking away the third beer bottle with his feet, Adalbert asks in a low voice,

“That brat... the one called Yuuri, what kind of a king is he exactly?”

“A-about that... he’s really impressive you know! His Majesty is really special.”

Dacascos desperately tries to use all his vocabulary to praise Yuuri, but no matter how he squeezes his brain, no matter how beautifully he describes him, the feeling that comes across is very ordinary. Faced without any other choice, he repeats ‘impressive’ and ‘special’ again, pauses for a moment and then adding,

“But recently... I feel as though he’s forcing himself a little.”

“Why would you say so?”

“I-I can’t describe it very well, but sometimes I feel that he may be too tired. But that’s to be expected! After all, it’s not easy to rule an entire country, and he was so young when he rose to the throne too. No matter what it is he’s doing, if he wasn’t trained for it beforehand, or if he doesn’t have a certain amount of experience, it’ll definitely be very hard for him. Did you know? His Majesty is only sixteen!”

“Sixteen, huh...”

Although Adalbert doesn’t say it out loud, his gaze is floating, as though determining this number.

“Exactly! Like when I was sixteen, I may have had more hair than I do now, but I couldn’t even tell the difference between an octopus and a branch! But His Majesty really has the aura of a king—Although I’m not that devout in my religion, but I have no choice but to believe that Lord Shinou is protecting us from beyond the grave, that’s why he chose such an appropriate person to ascend the throne.”

“Although he’s only sixteen, I heard that his love life is really colorful! I don’t know if it’s true or false, but I heard that he got engaged to the previous Maou’s third prince a long time ago?”

“That’s right, that’s true. That’s why His Excellency Günter’s nose ran like a river, and he cried while biting onto his handkerchief! But most of the people are happy to see it. In the bet for His Majesty’s affections, His Excellency Wolfram is rather popular too. But that’s unsurprising, since they’re such a good match! Aiya, like that time when the two of them were hiding together in the fruit

carton, I thought they were some foreign dolls and couldn't look away! But I spent three month's worth of salary to bet on His Excellency Günter—I'll just take it as my congratulatory present for them."

Dacascos imagines his superior officer's crying face every night, as he counts the amount of lottery money he got. This way he can finally pay off the loans and his kid's tuition fees... Maybe he can still let his wife stop working for His Excellency Gwendal, so he can have a hot meal waiting for him when he gets home. Just because he was imagining such a scene, he instinctively answers Adalbert's question.

"Is he happy?"

"Very—Ah! That's not right, you're referring to His Majesty, right!? I don't know if he's happy, but at least he looks very cheerful."

"Is that so?"

After that Adalbert falls silent, not saying anything at all, and not desperately hugging the railing while yelling a certain someone's name either, turning into a quiet, sullen drunk.

"Hey~~ Dacchan-san! Come over here and drink with us--! Captain Mountain Range wants to tell you stories of the Seisakoku holy temple--!"

Hearing the calls from the Calorian reinforcements onboard with them, Dacascos hastily gets up.

The reinforcements onboard under orders of Flynn Gilbit are all experienced mercenaries. The man like his name, Captain Mountain Range, always has a yellowed skull on his knee, and other than calling it 'Little Pot', he even talks to it. To others, be it the scars on his face and arms, or his scary appearance and fierce gaze, fill people with a sense of fear. But normally he is indeed a stable man, and well-loved by his men. And the comrades around him are all rather unusual men too, but since Yuuri helped their country through a crisis, they're not too against mazokus.

Surely they're most respected mistress, Flynn Gilbit must have spent a lot of time convincing them, huh?

Even they must surely find this unbelievable.

But Dacascos still walks slowly into this group of people that can share these doubts.

Kotsuhizoku shed their skin.

There has always been a veil of mystery surrounding their unique form of life, one that no one can reveal to this day. People can't tell which part of them is skin, and which part is bone, or even whether their body has a 'torso'.

Kotsuhizoku and kotsuchizoku sometimes stay in the dark and cold ground, while at other times they discard their old shell in the dry desert, becoming a completely new creature.

On a side note, there's absolutely no way to tell the difference from the surface.

The 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzle' is a product made of the useless parts kotsuchizoku don't use any more after molting, or when kotsuhizoku put themselves back together after crashing and find a spare piece from goodness knows where. It counts as a recyclable and safe toy, and is highly recommended by the Shin Makoku Child Education Committee.

The advanced level of playing with 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzles' is to find a combination that fits perfectly together from tens of thousands of bones. Lucky kids can find them within hours, but there are also some who can't find them even after they're all grown up. Though most children get tired of it before putting it together, abandoning the 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzle' to think of other games by themselves, thereby saying farewell to their childhood.

Greta is no exception.

Although she's returned to Blood Pledge Castle, she can't find anyone to play with her, so all she can do is stay in her adopted father's spacious room and obediently play with the bones alone.

She's already tired of 'Playing House of Bones' and 'Stack the Bones', and she's even measured the bone density of the larger pieces. The instruction manual said that 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzles' can build a pirate ship or a haunted castle, but the little girl who lives in a real castle, and has gone sailing around in a royal sailboat, doesn't find any excitement in even the picture of the completed sample.

Greta heaves a sigh that doesn't fit her age, and then puts the palm-sized bone to her ear as though it were a shell.

"Wow~~ There are graveyard sounds—"

She hears the screaming of the winds, a terrified dog howling, and the creaking of a rusted iron door. The rustling of the branches adds to the ominous atmosphere even more. Tomb raiders use a cross-shaped shovel to dig out a coffin, opening the coffin lid to get the treasure map...

"Waa!"

Hearing something like a murmur by her ear, Greta is shocked into throwing the bone puzzle piece onto the ground. But the bone piece doesn't break on impact, seems like it's actually rather sturdy.

"Just now... I think someone said something..."

She did indeed hear something like a voice talking. After a moment's hesitation, she carefully picks it up again, and brings it to her ear. It really isn't the graveyard sound effect, but a certain special language. Not only are all the pronunciations completely different from the language she uses, there's even a very heavy accent, so she can't understand a thing.

"Could this be what Yuuri meant by 'bone-static'?"

Greta hurriedly gathers up all the bones, wrapping them up in her blanket and carrying them out of the room. At times like these, look for the Poison Lady! There shouldn't be anything Anissina doesn't know!

"Anissina... Eh?"

She roughly kicks the door open with one foot, just in time to see the two silhouettes that were huddled closely together immediately separate.

"Eh?"

The one who jumped backwards was Lord von Voltaire Gwendal; the owner of the room, Lady von Karbelnikoff Anissina didn't move a finger.

There's a bubbling green liquid on the table again, while Kiku, now just an empty shell, sits on the book shelf. The room looks no different than a normal research lab.

And yet the atmosphere in the room is completely different from usual.

“We—ird--?”

Gwendal freezes in the stance of someone jumping away, but his expression is starting to change.

“Were you guys huddling together just now?”

“W-w-w-w-we were doing an experiment!”

Maybe it’s because it’s a forced answer, his tone becomes completely different. The ten-year-old girl, on the other hand, looks at the man twice as tall as her suspiciously.

“Could it be that you were in the middle of doing that thing that Beatrice’s father and mother do so often, a love-making experiment?”

“Ah, no, it’s n-n-n-n-n-n-not what you think—”

Too suspicious, just looking at it it’s suspicious. Hugging the blanket, Greta approaches the two step by step. She cannot forgive any man who tries to abduct Anissina, just because he’s Gwendal doesn’t mean he can make a move on the Poison Lady.

As for Anissina, she’s staring wide-eyed and mouth hanging at Gwendal’s expression of panic, the words ‘men are so useless’ almost escaping from her lips.

“Gwendal, look at you, flustered like this, why didn’t you just reject me from the start? Greta, Lord von Voltaire was almost going to cry just now. He’s so nervous because you saw him in such a humiliating state. He said before, rather than to let a woman see him cry, he would rather stuff his head into the bathtub —It’s just a few tears, and he’s already saying such stupid things. The way I see it, he might even think that there are men who never cried from the day they were born!”

“Gwen, why would you cry?”

“Regarding His Majesty and Wolfram’s matter, didn’t Lord von Voltaire plan to head for Seisakoku as soon as possible as well?”

Günter, who was chosen as the ambassador to Shou Shimaron, was forced to

separate from Yuuri and Wolfram, who had stowed away, by unforeseen circumstances, so now Yuuri was travelling to Seisakoku alone with the Shou Shimaron king. Saralegui seemed like a good person at first glance, but as his motives become clearer and clearer, he's no longer a safe travel companion. Although Wolfram should be on his way to catch up with them, but his power alone can't do much, so they really need reinforcements. Even if Gwendal, with his powerful maryoku, can't quite lead the army onto land, he can never stand by and do nothing.

"However, we don't have any information on Seisakoku in our hands at all—be it maps, drawings, or documents, none have anything useful. Therefore, we are completely clueless regarding what goes in within their borders. For future reference, we want to do what we can to collect detailed intel, so I want to use Gwendal, who will soon set foot in Seisakoku, to record the information from within Seisakoku borders."

Anissina, with her passion for research, would never give up this opportunity, of course.

"I plan on opening a hole in Lord von Voltaire's skull, and then bury the ma-powered surveillance device, 'Honest Mary'... But he seems to be very afraid of that surgery."

"Before talking about whether I was afraid or not, there is a medical ethical problem here, don't you think?!"

Anissina snorts at Gwendal's tearful retort, and points at his forehead with her neatly-manicured fingernail,

"Ethics? You're talking ethics with me, in front of these ma-powered devices... Oh, my! Greta, what's that bundle in your hands that looks like plunderage?"

Only then does the girl seem to remember something, spreading the blanket onto the ground.

"My, my, how nostalgic! These are 'Oh! Stack the Bones High', huh. Back then I used to collect a huge pile of used parts, trying to create a manmade kotsuhizoku!"

Another evil game to do with medical theories.

“These are called ‘Happy-Happy Bone Puzzles’ now, you know!”

“How did the name become so slapdash... Oh, right! Greta, there are many small pieces in the Bone High, if you don’t put them in a special jar it’s really easy to lose them!”

“Not that! Listen to me—Greta just received bone-statics, you know!?”

Gwendal pushes aside Greta’s fringe with his large hand, touching her forehead.

“Greta doesn’t have a fever!”

“Then why would you receive what-statics... Greta, listen carefully, there aren’t any aliens in this world, and even if there are, they won’t contact you every time.”

“Who are the aliens? The men?”

“We are aliens. Sometimes male and female can be in one body.”

Anissina straightened her hand, and tapped her throat repeatedly causing her voice to sound strange^[1].

“Don’t just borrow His Majesty’s joke material!”

“That’s not it, I’m not talking about ‘Close Encounters’ or ‘ET’, this is real! Greta really received bone-statics! I heard a kotsuhizoku’s soul scream!”

Even if she’s only repeating word for word what she heard from her father who grew up on Earth, but when it comes to the unknown creatures out there, she’s still more knowledgeable than more kids her age. However what she heard just now was the sound of something living in this world, and not the X-Files Yuuri was talking about. To convince these two, Greta desperately waves her little fist.

“But even mazoku can only hear the kotsuhizoku’s mind transmissions after training for it. Technically, Greta, who never saw kotsuhizoku, shouldn’t have this ability...”

“But you’re not Dacascos--!”

“Gwendal, you can’t deny something just with your instincts and logic.”

Anissina looks sideways at an uneasy Gwendal condescendingly, and then,

from the almost-crying Greta's feet, she picks up a palm-sized bone, cocks her head slightly, bringing the bone to her left ear.

"Although common sense says it's impossible, but Greta may very well be a language genius Poison Lady who only shows up once every thousand years... Mm-mm?"

She makes a grunt that doesn't fit her appearance, cocking her head even further, one of her pretty eyebrows going upwards.

"Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm-mm? I actually hear something. Sounds different from the rustling of trees or crabs walking, but it's obviously not the same as the sound of the wind entering a room... Seems to be a language we can't understand, and it seems like those words aren't meant to be heard by a Poison Lady! To a race like the kotsuhizoku that's made solely of bones, this sort of reaction is rather conservative."

Could it be that we really accidentally received a transmission from the kotsuhizoku!? Right, I'll call a deciphering expert here right away. A messenger! Call a messenger!"

"If you want to call one, you go ahead yourself. Just think about how long that person will take to get past the countless traps to reach this room in one piece. Anyone with even a little intelligence, would think of a more effective way, right?"

Resisting the urge to say 'it's all your fault for installing all those dangerous traps', Lord von Voltaire's hands can't stop shaking. Completely unconcerned, Lady von Karbelnikoff Anissina's eyes start shining brightly, and she raises a grey pocket that she took from goodness knows where—

"If it was me, I'd use this! Ta-la-ta-ta-ta---! Translation Year..."

"Wait a second! That convenient device is too dangerous!"

Gwendal quickly blocks Greta with his tall body, so she can't see the device in Anissina's hands. Maybe even she herself feels it's inappropriate? Anissina also puts down her hand, and grabs another device instead."

"Oh, dear! How dangerous, how could I do this kind of thing... This is something similar, and completely unrelated to ma-powered devices. The one

with the real Poison Lady symbol is this one... And it's the compact version, ta-la-ta-ta! 'Translation Cold Day!'"

This time she takes out a little brown teapot.

"Let me explain! This is the newly completed 'Translation Cold Day', just look at its transparent, slender and smooth exterior, theoretically, all you have to do is pour the cool 'this' into your ears, and you'll be able to understand all the languages of all the races in the whole world, it's a really~ handy invention."

"Theoretically."

Gwendal mumbles, looking at the mad magician after her breathless, long-winded speech. The terrifying inventor known as the 'Red Devil' holds up her pointer finger and shakes it lightly.

"What's there to be unsure of? Or do you think there's a mistake in my theory? Lord von Voltaire, come! I'll give you the first honors, bring your ear closer, it doesn't matter left or right."

"What!? You're using me for a human experiment again!?"

"Didn't you know that a long time ago?"

The Poison Lady's lips curve into an eerie smile, approaching slowly, step by step. A long and slender transparent object, occasionally pokes out from the teacup. Curled up in the small container, instinctively raring to go... Protecting his head with his hands, Gwendal takes quite a few steps backwards, his armpits and back long since soaked with sweat.

"S-stop! Last time I wore those 'Stuck-up Ears Headband' that were supposed to let me understand what cats were saying, and all that happened was my eardrums hurt like hell, it had no effect at all. This proves that I'm just not cut out for any experiments to do with ears. Besides, Lord von Christ is more suited for this kind of experiment..."

Although he doesn't dare to call it a failed product to her face, he has still made his stance clear. Anissina's body composition is mostly Poison Lad, but two thirds of that was created by Gwendal's consideration.

"Really, there's no use in saying any more!"

“Stop! Don’t waste food! I’m telling you to stop aah—ee—wu—ye—woo—”

This sort of thing has been happening for over a hundred years, and the victor was decided from the start. That’s why it makes no difference who’s rooting at the sidelines. Completely ignoring the war between the fox badger and the cobra, Greta brings the bone piece to her ear again. She can hear it—She really can hear the contents of the conversation.

“...There is...”

Even Anissina, who’s getting ready to pour the Cold Day, stops because of Greta’s voice.

“In Seisakoku—there are really, really big temples... used to hide the bodies of dead kings... They’re really, really big graves, you know—”

“Greta?”

Whilst being ridden by his childhood friend, Gwendal listens to the girl’s real-time translation.



“...There are a lot, a lot of shiny jewelry and really rare treasures in the graves...

So cool! Isn't that right—Terine-shan... Um, who is Terine-shan?"

"Enough, ignore those childish parts. Ah! Greta, you don't purposely have to translate it to sound sophisticated! If it's possible, please translate it into simpler words."

Gwendal grabs Anissina with his hands and gently lifts her, pulling her away from his stomach. The Poison Lady forgot to make a fuss of about it, hurriedly rushing to Greta's side,

"Impressive! You really are the best language genius Poison Lady since the first Maou ruled the world!"

Seems like she can't just be a normal language expert.

"How did you translate that!? Information... Did you get any related information? Greta, what does it feel like? Does it feel like 'hua-hua-hua'? Or like 'poh-poh-poh'?"

"It's neither, yeesh!"

The excited Anissina desperately grabs Greta, who started translating with relying on mechanical ma-power.

"After the interference disappeared, I can hear it really clearly. And it's not the secret conversation between kōhi and their comrades, how do I describe it... it's like that thing I played with Yuuri... that... tele—tele..."

"Telekinesis^[2]?"

"Telephone game! It feels like that!"

"In other words, it's just a communicator?"

And then the three of them fight to put the bone to the ears.

"What? Each king has a huge tomb?"

Dacascos, who had gotten happily drunk for the first time in a long time, reacts loudly in surprise to Captain Mountain Range's murmurs. Almost everyone around them is in a drunken stupor, collapsed all over the sea-smelling deck and not budging. The only ones left are the mazoku representative, Dacascos, the human representative Captain Mountain Range, and Terine-shan on the

captain's knee.

The skull shines yellowish-brown, an endless darkness in those hollow eye sockets. Feeling as though he's meeting his gaze, all the hairs on Dacascos' arms stand on end.

"And they're set apart from the temples, too? What a waste of space~ Our country takes the temple as a tomb, that's why we only have one Shinou Shrine, you know!"

But that Shinou Shrine isn't the tomb of the previous Maous. It's normal for abdicated Maous to return to their own hometowns, and elegantly live off the rest of their lives. Thus, it's natural for them to be buried in their clan graveyards after their passing. The design of the graveyards are more extravagant than the public cemeteries, but they're not worth envying or anything. At the most, there aren't any kotsuhizoku buried there.

"Waa—Seisakoku takes up such a vast area of land—But why is Captain Mountain Range so clear about it? The way I see it, could it be that you are actually from there... No, it shouldn't be possible. No matter how I look at you, Captain Mountain Range must be a human, right?"

"Lilit Latchie is a meanie, Terine-shan. Because he refuses to talk to Terine-shan, huh."

Even though he's using a childish tone, he still scares Dacascos into shaking. Crap, back then he promised to talk to the skull on his knee whenever he talks to Captain Mountain Range. Rule number 1: Show your respect for Terine-shan.

"S-shorr... Wait, it's sorry."

"As long as you know your mistake! Right, Terine-shan?"

The drunken mercenary comrades suddenly stand up and start yelling,

"Terine-shan is too~ cute--! When we die, we want to become bones as pretty and shiny as Terine-shan!"

They don't know that Terine-shan is a kotsuhizoku, and has always looked like that.

"In that country filled with shinzoku everywhere, are there a bunch of dead

people bones as pretty as Terine-shan buried in those tombs--? It must be that, that's why so many people run in there to steal stuff, right? No wonder there's no end to the grave robbers! Their first priority must be those pretty dead people bones, and then the gold and jewels are an added bonus. Those things can be sold at high prices in other countries, right—"

"Waa! How terrifying, to think that there are other people who dare to dig graves besides the kotsuhizoku and the Poison Lady Annissina! Isn't that right, Terine-shan?"

Almost forgetting the promise again, Dacascos hurriedly talks to the target on the knee. As for Captain Mountain Range, he's so happy his face reddens slightly.

"There are a lot, a lot of sparkly jewelry and really rare treasures in those tombs—Isn't that amazing, Terine-shan?"

"I heard that Seisakoku was in lockdown, then how on earth do you bring the treasure out? And it's gold and jewels from the royal graves, wouldn't it be bad if they were discovered by customs? Right, Terine-shan?"

"Of course they'd go by boat—Terine-shan's friend's grandpa, is a ship captain specializing in smuggling loot from Seisakoku, right—"

Right then, 'Terine-shan's friend' that Captain Mountain Range is talking about actually refers to himself. Before Dacascos can say 'what, then shouldn't you be called Ocean Bay Captain instead of Mountain Range Captain?', one of the older subordinates jumps to his feet like a spring, saying cheerily,

"Oh, Captain Mountain Range, you and Terine-shan are the ship captains again. Even if it's been a long time since we pulled off a big one, we still got a lot of gold and jewels from before, huh. Like the thing we got last time, I heard that's a box that spews fire—it should be the fire-spewing box from the legends. I think that one can sell for a really high price."

This time it's a box that spews fire, huh... Feeling fed up, Dacascos can't help but sigh.

Why does everything go back to cube-shaped things these days. Be it the one the His Excellency Günter secretly yells about, the one found in Dai Shimaron on orders, or the one that His Majesty and His Excellency Wolfram found on the

voyage last time, they're all boxes. Boxes, boxes, boxes, all boxes.

Could it be that cubes are in fashion in the world right now?

In the royal capital of Shin Makoku, deep within Blood Pledge Castle, in a properly temperature-regulated secret Poison Lady research center, the trio who have the 'Happy-Happy Bone Puzzle' or 'Oh! Stack the Bones High' pressed to their ears, are currently repeating every single word they hear in a shout.

"Goodness!"

"How could it be!"

"Bone High--!"

Gwendal's expression changes abruptly, and he suddenly yells at the bone,

"Don't let Wolfram get close to Seisakoku! Catch him and bring him back immediately!"

But all he sees is the white bone covered with his spit, and there's naturally no reply whatsoever.

"Damn it, it can only receive signals!"

The bone piece is hurled onto the floor, making a clear noise then rolling to a side, but it doesn't crack, as solid as expected.

"What's the matter, Lord von Voltaire? Spraying your spittle everywhere, it's really rude!"

"Exactly, how could you, Gwen, it's so dirty—"

Their fondness for Lord von Voltaire instantly drops by twenty, this is indeed behavior ladies detest.

"You can still be so relaxed!? Aaaa—I'm not mad at Greta, you know! Did you hear what I just said!? Aaaa—I'm not talking about Greta!"

Gwendal is so careful, trying his best to avoid hurting the adorable little girl. Having long since lost his normal cool, he uneasily paces around the room.

"When they said a box that spews flames, it should be that one, right? Either than that I really can't think of any other boxes that spew flames."

“What is ‘that’ you’re talking about? If it’s just starting a fire, that are over a hundred of those in the prototype warehouse. But if it’s not just spewing fire, but also freeze rays or touching music, then there aren’t a lot of those.”

Gwendal is so shocked he almost dislocates his jaw, thinking, ‘This mad ma-power scientist, exactly how fast is she making these rare and weird things?’ She said more than a hundred? If they could have simply borrowed one to use during the war before, who knows what kind of an advantage they might have had...

Doing that will go against the treaty, so the idea just flicks past his mind. He must never be led by the nose by the Poison Lady.

“By ‘that’ I mean ‘that’. A box. One of those four most fearsome, most dangerous Boxes, that according to ancient legends, must never be touched.”

“Oh~~ You’re talking about the ones sealing up the soushu! About that, there’s one in the Shinou Shrine, too! It’s that completely worthless Wind’s...”

“Stop that nonsense!”

Anissina pulls her childhood friend’s hand away from her mouth, swishing her red hair, tied way up high, and snorts arrogantly,

“Gwendal, you’re already over a hundred years old, why are you still so scared? It’s just a box, what’s there to be scared about? It’s already locked up in the Shinou Shrine, there’s no way it can escape by itself, right?”

“That’s because... it doesn’t have legs. Wait, that’s not right. They shouldn’t be talking about ‘Wind’s End’, I remember there should be four Boxes according to legend. One of them is ‘Inferno of the Frozen Land’, fortunately this Box hasn’t fallen into human hands.”

“And—so—what--?”

Anissina puts both hands on her waist, tied until it’s slender and tight, unafraid of her own petite frame, and makes a contemptuous pose.

“If it appears in the Seisakoku tombs, wouldn’t that mean it had fallen into shinzoku hands since at least the previous monarch’s time!”

“And—so—what--?”

“If the shinzoku are abusing it... why on earth would it be buried in the tombs?”

I don't understand it at all."

"Could it be that they don't need it at all? This proves that they don't mean to use it, right? Didn't we put the 'Wind's End' into Shinou's tomb, the Shinou Shrine? We're not preserving those Boxes at all, since those filthy wooden boxes can't help increase the majesty of the country in any way. Towards any realities and phenomena unrelated to mechanical ma-power, I believe that seeing is believing."

Right now Greta's red-brown eyes staring at Anissina are sparkling with respect and admiration. Gwendal's shoulders sag helplessly, if only everyone in this world was like Anissina—but then the world would probably be destroyed by some other reason.

"But... if the box that spews fire they're talking about really is 'Inferno of the Frozen Land', and if the shinzoku only temporarily buried it in the tomb because they don't know how to unleash its power, what will happen then? And more importantly, if the person or item that carries the Key stumbles across the location of the Box..."

Anissina watches Gwendal, whose expression has changed dramatically and is so worried he's pacing back and forth, while she sips a health drink that (may) help growth with a 'chuu—' noise.

'If, if, if, are you a slow-action land tortoise!? Besides, we're not even sure who the Key is yet!'

"Who on earth...!?"

According to Gegenhuber's report, the Key to one of the Boxes, 'Ends of the Earth', seems to be someone's left eye. Back then he fit the criteria very well, that's why his left eye was burned off, but they still couldn't open the seals. More seriously, there's the Key to the other Box, 'Wind's End'—Lord Weller Conrart's left arm, and that brought actual disaster to Shou Shimaron and Caloria.

Thankfully it wasn't too destructive a result, but that's all because the 'Box' wasn't compatible with the 'Key'. The first time was because it was a fake Key that is close to the real one, the second time was because the Box and the Key didn't match. But the Key to 'Wind's End' was the first of all the Boxes and Keys

to be created, so it can open all the seals. Only, the 'Wind's End' that fell into Shou Shimaron hands doesn't seem to be complete.

According to ancient legend, the descendants of the four clans that sealed up the soushu bear a heavy responsibility as the Keys. Right now the confirmed Keys are the left eye of someone related in blood to Gegenhuber, and Lord Weller Conrart's left arm.

Terrifying ideas keep surfacing in Gwendal's mind.

"The von Bielefeld has been a prominent clan since before the country was founded. Wolfram is very likely one of the remaining two Keys..."

"Then, the one who defeated the soushu of the wind is Conrad's ancestor?"

"Ah! Then the one who beat the soushu of the earth to a pulp, was Hube and Gwendal's great-great-great-great-grandfather, right?"

Greta says excitedly, pleased with herself for getting these blood relations straightened out in one go. But as soon as the girl says that, she realizes the horrifying possibility, and adds in a shaky voice,

"Then, Gwen's left eye is the Key to the earth Box?"

"Greta, don't get ahead of yourself. There's no solid proof."

"No, it's okay,"

Only when it's related to himself, can Gwendal calmly agree to Greta's hypothesis.

"This is a fact that can be guessed at even without any solid proof, but that shiny... No, since they mentioned Dacascos' name, we can probably determine that the location was on Captain Sizemore's ship. And Wolfram's on that ship—If 'Inferno of the Frozen Land' really is in Seisakoku, then it's really too dangerous to send him there!"

Compared to Anissina, sipping her drink looking completely unaffected, whenever it has anything to do with his brothers, Gwendal will become a completely different person, panicked and lost.

"Damn it!"

Thank goodness he's using both his hands to hammer the table, or he might grab his grey hair and start screaming madly.

It was the same the last time. After he met up with Gisela, they successfully found Yuuri—Though they accomplished that very well, they indirectly allowed Kinan to steal the 'Key'--- in other words, Conrad's arm. Although it was pointless to scold Wolfram for it, it was undeniably a huge loss.

"There wasn't any problem with the plan itself, and the contents were conservative and detailed, so even if we failed the losses would be cut to a minimum. But why did the God of Luck abandon us?"

The way he looks, hammering the table, is too terrifying. Even Greta is trembling in fear, covering her ears as she says,

"Gwen... don't hit the table."

"Has all your education gone to nothing!?"

"Don't be like this, Gwen! Don't be mad, just don't be mad!"

"But!"

The fist that's raised once more is held in mid-air by a white hand—Anissina throws down the silver container and grabs his wrist tightly. As long as those thin fingers exert power, even Gwendal, who's used to easily swinging around large weapons, can't budge an inch. After he's calmed down, Anissina's lips curve into a smile,

"Don't act so violently in front of children, look how scared Greta is. I understand your hopes and concerns for your little brother. But these things happen in the world, situations when you've done your all and things still don't go your way. Some people are just that unlucky, so all you can say is that he's born under an unlucky star."

"Is Wolfram the Little Prince^[3]?"

The little girl asks, her voice nasally as she holds back tears.

After releasing her childhood friend's hand, Anissina smile brightly at Greta,

"Maybe? But he may not be, too! Even if Wolfram is the Little Prince, he probably isn't the king, right? But this may not be an unlucky thing. Even if he

can't win on his own, if he gets help from his comrades, and has that certain someone by his side, maybe he can bring out his innate strength."

"Who is..."

Anissina presses her finger against the child's mouth, stopping the question, 'who is that?' Her fingernail has been trimmed oval, shining a healthy pale pink color.

"It's okay as long as he himself understands it. I'm guessing they'll notice eventually, but that isn't something that can be solved immediately, after all. Right now the matter of urgency is to investigate which clans bear the responsibility of the Keys. If the von Bielefeld clan is one of the four Keys, then a different danger will approach Wolfram."

Anissina walks up to the enormous writing table, and beckons her Poison Lady substitute.

"Greta, come over here! This is a good opportunity, for me to teach you properly how to read ancient books and texts."

"Reading ancient books!? You're still in the relaxed mood to do that sort of thing!"

"You don't have to mind us, Gwendal. Go ahead and do whatever you want! It's up to you if you want to go to the seaside or the beach, if you want to go then just get going. But if you're going to operate solo like your little brother, and then cry loudly when you're in an emergency and don't have enough information, I won't be able to help you there!"

"I'll solve this myself! As if I'd want to listen to your orders even when it comes to my own family matters!"

Absorbed in her own task, Anissina doesn't even look at Gwendal, who's lost his calm, and says while holding up the heavy reference book,

"Lord von Voltaire, didn't I say that there are some people who, without someone else, won't be able to regain their power, I meant you, you know!"

"Stop joking!"

After hurling the bone in his hand at the table, Lord von Voltaire bolts out of

the research room.

“Gwendal...”

Greta looks between the door and Aninssina in a panic. When it comes down to it, this all started when she heard the kotsuhizoku transmission.

“Anissina, what to do... Gwen’s mad.”

“I know, but you don’t have to worry about it. He doesn’t have the ability to operate alone without us. At the most he’ll walk to the end of the corridor or the stairs, count to three, and come back.”

It’s exactly as Anissina said. Not a few dozen seconds later, he walks back in with an expression of sorrow and his head held low.

Because he simply can’t find anyone else to discuss this with.

1. [Jump up ↑](#) Other than speaking into a fan, this is how Japanese people make themselves sound like aliens <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nbg-lW0PnA>

2. [Jump up ↑](#)

I played a little with the words here, the Chinese terms were ‘sound transmitting tube’ and Anissina(?) guessed ‘love transmitting’ or something, but I’m pretty sure the Japanese originals are something else altogether...

3. [Jump up ↑](#)

She uses the title of the book "The Little Prince" which in Japanese is "The Prince from the Stars".

MaruMA:Volume11:Chapter 4

Chapter 4

A new dawn has arrived.

I mean yesterday's dawn.

"Then does it still count as new?"

Josak, who's swinging his arms together with me, interrupts from my side.

I'm sitting cross-legged on the narrow lifeboat, happily stretching my arms and looking up into the sky. The sky above me is dusted with a thin veil of clouds, the sun playing peekaboo from between them—the weather has been like this since morning. Something worth being grateful for, is that now isn't the time when the sun beats down on us from above, if we were hit directly by that kind of sun, we'd probably be long since dehydrated.

As for why—There's no water onboard.

We're drifting on a world of water called the 'sea', but there's no fresh water that can wet our throats and sustain life within reach, and there isn't any food either. If it was just a couple days, we can still handle it. For that, I have to be grateful that I usually get enough food, and I have quite a bit of meat on my stomach and thighs. For that, I have to be grateful that this is a time of ample food, and be grateful for my muscles too.

To show gratitude to the muscles on me, I have to give them the appropriate stimuli regularly. It doesn't matter if I'm currently in a narrow place where I can't stand up whenever I want. If we don't exercise more while we can move, our blood vessels will get obstructed and produce lactic acid. I want to at least move my upper body a bit, so I very diligently do radio aerobics^[1], and recently I've even invented a sit-down version of the exercise on my own.

"It's very important to do relaxing or stretching exercises, you know! It can also prevent us finally getting to go on holiday abroad, only to get economy class

syndrome^[2].”

The only one amongst us who has experienced air travel, Lord Weller, corrects me half-heartedly,

“You’re talking about a plane, but we’re on a boat now.”

“It’s basically the same, sheesh.”

My tone is so bad even I think it’s not very nice of me. Maybe it’s because he noticed the weird atmosphere between us? Saralegui creases his neat brows, saying,

“What is that weird exercise? Is it a mazoku habit? Waving your limbs like a monkey, how fascinating.”

“These are radio aerobics, you know. It’s normal if you’ve never seen it. In order to live an active and effective life, I do these every morning during my summer break!”

“Is that so—Then are those ‘Actie’ and ‘Effectie’ husband and wife?”

That, I don’t know.

“Yuuri, are you feeling uncomfortable? Are you seasick but pretending to be okay?”

“I’m fine, and I don’t feel uncomfortable anywhere, my body feels perfectly fine!”

“But why don’t I think so? Ah! Turns out you’re like me, whenever you’re in the sun or the sea breeze, the skin on your face and fingers get really dry.”

“Mmph!”

He leans over to caress my face, a hint of sadness in his eyes behind those pale-colored lenses.

“No wonder, we haven’t soaked in a bath for almost two days, there’s not even a chance for us to wash off the salt on our bodies with plain water. Ah~ how I wish I could soak in hot water full of medicinal properties, to let the warm steam open up my pores, and get rid of all the old filth. Yuuri thinks the same, right? Otherwise your skin will be just like that fake woman over there! No way,

that'd be too much of a waste."

"What did you say, hah?"

I see the muscles in Josak's face twitching. Although doing so now is a bit weird, I still hastily squeeze in between the spy and the king from another country.

"B-but I was always a baseball boy that likes being in the sun, and loves outdoor activities, so this degree of sun is nothing! Don't need to feel sorry for me, really. Gurrier has been stressed out a lot too, right? Because I'm just too useless, so you have to spend your mind and energy to take care of me, I'm so sorry."

Lord Weller, with his arms on his knees supporting his chin, looks out into the waves with an expression of apathy. And the few Shou Shimaron crewmen stop their rowing actions to keep glancing our way. Since they're already bone-dead exhausted, if they heard such a stupid conversation, they'd surely feel uneasy.

"Ah~ Sorry, let's switch! I'll go over there right now."

When I move along the narrow boat with my waist bent low, Josak shrugs helplessly and follows me without a word. Although I volunteered to join the rowing team, but after four rounds even he's run out of things to say.

The Shou Shimaron king Saralegui and his cargo ship crewmen, and the king's guard Lord Weller, add that to Josak and I, and that makes the twelve of squeezed into this cramped lifeboat, drifting on the sea for an entire day. Yesterday evening when we escaped from the cargo ship, the land looked like it was just ahead. But once we really boarded a small boat without a sail, and move forward with only the power of a few people rowing, we finally realize that the distance hasn't been shortening at all. Although we can see the brown land with our naked eyes, but the direction of the waves is the opposite of our rowing.

"But Sara, I know you really like baths, but can't you have a bit of a sense of danger? Hey—your Majesty the King, do you know the current situation? We're basically in a wreck!"

"Is that so—"

Saralegui hugs his cheeks with his palms, replying in the tone of someone unaware of the seriousness of the situation.

But the mastermind who lied to them that the cargo ship has a problem, and forced them into this situation, is yours truly.

In my sixteen years of life being unpopular with the ladies, forget being chased, I haven't even experienced someone coming up to me of their own accord. Right now, though, because of my absurd lies, this group of men physically better than me by several times are drifting with me on foreign waters.

"Eh~ And we can already see the land, too."

"Young Master, do you want to help row? Or will you just leave it to me? Can I please ask you to make a decision?"

"I'll row, I'll row, of course I'll row. Although every time I row I might just be using the power of three swings."

The pale brown land can only be seen the split second when the boat is lifted high by a wave, but at least we're not drifting in the dead center of the Pacific, and our target is very obvious. I cheer myself up that way, and continue holding the wooden oars covered with splinters.

The orange-haired spy beside me blows a 'hua-hua-puu—hua-hua-puu' whistle as he deftly handles the oars. This rhythm seems sort of familiar. His pride-- those biceps, are also peeking out from underneath his rolled-up chef's outfit. Doesn't he feel cold? Even though I haven't rolled up my sleeves, I feel cold, instead.

"How cold... If we go on like this, it'll be even worse when the sun sets... Mn?"

I just happen to look around the ocean surface, and notice a white object surfacing from the waves, so I rub my eyes, which I can barely open in the sea breeze, and blurrily see someone's arm.

Arm...? I let go of the oars and rub my eyes again to look closely. Using my 2.0 vision to carefully determine it, it really looks like a human arm, or I should say it simply is a human arm.

"Waa! This is bad, bad! Conrad, your arm, is your arm still there!?"

“It’s still here, Your Majesty?”

Before suspecting why there would be a human arm in the middle of the sea, I worry first about Lord Weller’s left arm, and he replies honestly too. Now isn’t the time to feel awkward.

“A-arm, arm, arm, arm, there’s an arm there!”

I use the exaggerated reaction of someone in a two-hour long detective series, pointing at the white thing, and by now the Shou Shimaron crewmen have started fidgeting as well. The base underneath that slender long forearm doesn’t seem to be affected by the waves, staying where it is without budging. Is this a horror film in the middle of the sea? Or a lonely water ballet solo!?

“Save them, first we must save them!”

Josak, a few of the crewmen and I grab the oars and start rowing desperately, the boat quickly dashes up to the arm, until we can clearly see that pale palm, but there aren’t any life lines on it.

“Should we say, ‘Hang in there, I’m coming to save you!’?”

“I don’t know... Ah, Young Master, really!”

“Waa!”

I shut my eyes tightly despite myself. The cold and bloated skin, feels like rubber to the touch, completely unlike a live human arm.

“It’s not a floating corpse, is it?”

“M-maybe. Eeeek—It feels, a little, disgusting—”

I don’t know what kind of funerals seamen have, but if you want me to let go of a hand I held and ignore it, I can’t do that either. Although I’m a little scared thinking of what may be under that arm, I still resist the terror and pull that arm.

That heavy and white arm gets closer and closer to the boat, Josak leans out to try and give me a hand, while some kind crewmen also try to observe what’s in the water from the side. Just as I’m about to exert more force and pull them up

—

I make a very embarrassing scream, and try to let go of that right hand.

“What’s the matter!?”

“He’s grabbing me! This guy grabbed my hand... Waa!”

In that moment I am almost completely pulled into the sea, and I hastily grab the side of the lifeboat. Josak also hugs my waist in time, preventing me from being pulled under.

“Yuuri!”

Conrad yells in a nervous voice completely unlike him, and just as he’s running over here, the lifeboat starts swaying from side to side. In spite of myself, the ‘do not run on the boat’ warning flashes into my mind.

“No way, sheesh, it’s not working! Don’t hold my pants, hold my legs! Hold my legs tightly! Waa—my pants are gonna come off, my pants are gonna come off! I’m not a male stripper!”

“I know, ‘stripping’ is Gurrier’s job!”

“Your Majesty, please calm down. Those guys mean well.”

A warm hand touches my back, like comforting a child—it’s a familiar touch to me.

“Those guys?”

I’m pulled by a strong force until my entire face is almost plastered to the ocean surface, and I finally see the countless creatures in the water. A school of fish the size of tuna with sparkling silver scales, are fanning past the blue water and swimming, carefree.

By swimming, I mean swimming with their deft limbs.

“Fish have arms and legs...”

“Maidmer princesses.”

The owner of the arm lets go of my hand and jumps out of the water, the violent leap splashing water into the boat. He has a pair of legs too, no, judging from the white and soft legs, that was probably a ‘she’.

“But those guys with a lot of leg hair, are they male maidmer princesses?”

“No, they’re manmer lords. Their people need a long time to grow limbs, and

then they change from fish-shaped to humanoid.”

“That should count as an evolution, right? Speaking of which, last time I carried one in the Shin Makoku sewers, huh? Or should I say it was a maidmer princess.”

Back then I thought she was Murata.

“Oh~ If that’s the case...”

The maidmer princesses and manmer lords wave their hands in the blue and clear water, and caught within the current that they created, the lifeboat is already moving towards the land at a fairly smooth speed.

“They must be here to repay Your Highness’ kindness.

“...Don’t call me Your Majesty”

I suddenly regain my sanity, and say so as I move my gaze to somewhere else, I’m scared to look at his face.

My wet fringe is plastered tightly to my forehead, making me uncomfortable, so I simply push it upwards, and the seawater that drips down has a piercing smell of the sea.

“Your ‘Your Majesty’ isn’t me, right.”

My voice has suddenly become very stiff, and Lord Weller’s curt answer is as cold as ice.

“I apologize... in my haste I didn’t notice.”

After saying that, he turns and returns to Saralegui’s side. Josak mutters with his mouth slanted sideways, his tone and voice full of contempt,

“What a bother~ Such a draggy man, my Young Master is a lot manlier than you.”

How am I manly?

“Don’t make me laugh!”

If my will was strong enough, no matter what others call me, I should be able to reply with a laugh, right? It’s exactly because I’m narrowed-hearted that I reacted that way, if I knew how to think for others, then I wouldn’t be blowing

off on any little thing.

I put all my strength into waving my arms, offering my gratitude to the maidmer princesses and the manmer lords. This time they will definitely send us to Seisakoku!

There's nowhere better to take a foreign lady in a kimono with what looks like koi embroidery out for a walk than the Narita Airport in the late night.

Anyway, no one will report the police here. And clueless foreigners are just like those Japanese tourists with glasses and a camera hanging around their necks, not rare in the slightest.

"In other words, isn't that super rare!?"

Even the comedy couples from Yoshimoto Kogyo^[3] don't wear such extravagant kimonos anymore.

Shibuya Shouri pushes his glasses up his nose, telling everyone they meet,

"Not me! I'm not this woman's partner!"

But in the midnight airport after a typhoon, no one bothers with him at all. That sense of emptiness leaves him feeling horrible.

As for the clueless lady who's putting on a show of walking beside him, whenever she brushes against any pedestrian, she will fold her palms together and bow.

"Are you a spy sent here by the Shaolin Temple?"

"What—are you saying--? The Japanese are all very polite. The way of GAY^[4] is the way of the geisha, which is to 'begin with a bow and end with a bow', right?"

Shouri, with the future of Tokyo on his shoulders, looks skywards and heaves a sigh. Why do they spread such misconceptions about Japan? Quentin Tarantino has to bear responsibility for this!

"Wait a sec, Graves, don't talk to strangers with that weird Japanese of yours! It'll only make them more troubled."

"OH—Japanese people shouldn't be so cold. And Shouri, don't call me Graves, please call me Abby, Abby. NO NO NO NO NO, LOOK ME, LOOK MY MOUSE. A-

bby, please say A-bby.”

“This isn’t the Wicky^[5] era anymore!”

The American sitting in the VIP lounge, Abigail Graves in her unique kimono, has stuck with him like glue ever since she found out Shouri is Bob’s friend. Shouri tried to contact Bob with his phone, but it’s as though Bob was sealed in a heavy lead box, because there’s no response at all. Just when he’s thinking that all he can do now is lead her near a taxi, forcefully send her to Narita Airport, and was planning on walking straight to the exit—

Abigail continuously holds back the people passing by, and then keeps on greeting them in her imperfect Japanese. Hearing her Japanese mixed with 10% vulgar content, Shouri finally loses it and yells,

“Speak in English! This is really embarrassing!”

As a result Abigail suddenly says in a teaching material tone,

“I don’t wanna, your English is like the Teletubbies.”

“The Teletubbies can’t talk, and compared to your half-assed Japanese that’s much... Whoa!”

Bob is finally replying, and Shouri picks up his phone enthusiastically.

“Bob, what’s going on here? Why is your guest here? If this wasn’t an astronomical coincidence, causing me to bump into her, this koi might have waited for you in the airport lounge until she turned to stone!”

‘You’re exaggerating, JUNIOR.’

Shouri tsks in dissatisfaction, indicating to Bob not to call him that.

‘I’m waiting for Rodriguez, but he’s not here yet.’

“I don’t care if you’re waiting for Rodriguez or Madriros, I’m telling you to talk to her!”

Abigail Graves widens her eyes and stares at him for a while, then accept the phone Shouri hands her. And then her voice suddenly goes higher—

“OH—Bapu!”

“Not Bapu, why is it Bapu!”

Standing beside someone speaking their mother tongue at four times the speed, the elite student who successfully passed the English proficiency test is dying. Maybe it's because her speaking speed is naturally especially fast, so he can only understand a few nouns he recognizes. She's not arguing it out with Bob, but instead she chats for several minutes in an intimate tone. Before returning the phone to Shouri, she even laughs out loudly at something Bob said.

"You and the driver, who's coming to pick her up?"

'That's impossible, Shibuya.'

Bob's next suggestion is far beyond his imagination.

"You want me—to be her host!?"

Shouri repeats in a tone of disbelief, "You want me—to host this woman?" His brows even droop into a figure eight (八).

'That's right, Shouri. Abby is my guest, but you know, because of your little brother's emergency situation, I forgot that she arrives in Japan today. So sorry, but before Ken goes to where you are, can you please help me host her? Isn't receiving visitors the basic ability of the Japanese working class?"

"Stop joking, Bob! It's against electoral law for the governor to host or be hosted by anybody! And even if that's not the case, I don't want to have anything to do with a fake geisha who's like a B-grade movie actress! Besides, if I take her around, what'll happen if anyone mistakes us for lovers!? The hell I'm doing this! And even more besides, how old is this fella? For all I know she's just a high school student^[6]! Even if it's not so bad, she's still a HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, right? I don't want to break Tokyo laws!"

'Aren't you a citizen of the Saitama prefecture?'

The Maou of the financial world calmly corrects the older Shibuya brother, who's screaming until his voice is hoarse.

"N-no matter what it won't work, I still want to go the Niagara Falls in a moment. And I don't have the money to deal with an heiress who can go around the world while still a high school student... Ah!"

The call was cut, and no matter how he dialed it wouldn't go through. The

image of a man in sunglasses cackling on the other end of the phone immediately floats into his mind. He must feel like he's managed to get a hot iron off his hands.

"Hey, Graves, let me just make this clear to you!"

Having no choice but to keep his phone into his pocket, Shibuya Shouri once again turns around to face Abigail. Although from her point of view this trip has been unfortunate from the start, but right now all he can do is ask her to tour Tokyo on her own.

"I don't have the sweet time to bring you around, because my brother's matter is more important. After you go back to your country, you can bring your boyfriend to TDL (Tokyo Disney Land), USJ (Universal Studios Japan), or Edo Wonderland. Remember to take a picture with Nyanmage, okay? Americans who always put their family first would agree, right?"

"NONO, there aren't Nyanmages in Boston. What happened to your brother, by the way?"

"That has nothing to do with you, but due to certain reasons I have to get to Niagara and make it flow backwards. As for you, just find a hotel nearby for the night! As long as you bring out Bob's name you should be able to book a room."

The phone in his front pocket, suddenly starts vibrating, and the blue light on it flickers non-stop—There's a mail from the service provider's inbox coming this way.

Subject: Seen the BBS

Abigail looks at the plasma screen, reading out the words on it loudly,

"See, BBS... Bong! Ow, that hurt!"

"Don't just read the words you know!"

I've seen your message, Niagara doesn't seem too possible... But why would you want to make it flow backwards? Are you planning some ultimate magic to do with water? Seems like Paint-and-Build Sex Toy's interests are pretty vast, huh—But right now I'm not talking about the waterfall, I'm talking about the UMA (Unidentified Mysterious Animal) that's been sighted a lot recently in the

Swiss Bodensee^[7], that may be an omen that the Alps are going to erupt. (Because the Alps aren't volcanoes, lol) I wonder, can this count as a type of miscellaneous study?

"Hey, hey! I'm looking for an impact as big as a nuclear explosion, not some Bossy^[8] or M'Boma^[9]!"

But the one watching his every move isn't the media, it's Abigail.

"There's something weird with Bodensee? Crap, since you mentioned Bodensee, I can't stay out of this any longer. I have to report this to Mummy! But why would the Japanese find out about Bodensee so quickly?"

"You just keep saying 'Boden, Boden', were you sent here by the ice-cream company^[10]? What's the matter, Graves, don't tell me you got a mansion there too?"

"Nah, Mummy said something super scary is sleeping in that lake. Right, and of course I don't mean a hibernating giraffe."

Once the topic gets serious, she switches to her mother tongue, but only at twice the speed, so it's easier to understand.

"I don't know if it's real or not, but I heard that if the seal is broken, it will cause serious damage to the world, so it seems to be a super scary thing. Old pal, that's all I know."

Abigail beckons to Shouri, bringing her lips to his ear,

"In World War II, the Nazis once coveted that power too! I heard that back then, to prevent it from falling into those guys' hands, my great grandmother sank it to the bottom of Bodensee."

"What kind of a person was your great grandmother?"

"Oh, dear!"

Abigail Graves ignores the fact that she's wearing a kimono, opening her legs wide, bending one knee slightly, raising her right hand into the sky, while her empty left hand is put on her waist. Suddenly it's a nostalgic, perfect Travolta pose.

“We Graves are generations of treasure hunters, you know!”

But Shouri’s head is full of ‘even the Nazis coveted that power’, not caring at all about what treasure hunters. Compared to making the world’s number one waterfall flow backwards, wouldn’t that power be more likely to fulfill his wish?

Switzerland, huh... Then he must immediately cancel the waiting list seat, and change it to Europe. Wait a second, what is the common language in Switzerland? Can he communicate even without using English? And their currency isn’t a Mark or a Franc, but a Euro, huh? One Euro equals to how many Japanese yen, he doesn’t know ... But Shouri does know that one Yuuri equals to one younger brother^[11].

Abigail continues talking to Shouri, whose head is already full of the European plan,

“PS. I’m a cheerleader and a treasure hunter!”

PPS. ‘Paint-and-Build Sex Toy’ is Shouri’s username—But he doesn’t want his own brother to know that.

1. [Jump up ↑](#)

Something about NHK airing these aerobic exercises since 1928

2. [Jump up ↑](#) Economy class syndrome: The formation of blood clots in veins deep within the legs occurring during a long airplane flight, especially in economy class where there is the least space allotted per passenger and ones legs tend especially to be immobilized for lack of leg room.

(<http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=15872>)

3. [Jump up ↑](#) Yoshimoto Kogyo is a major Japanese entertainment conglomerate, with its headquarters based in Osaka. It was founded in 1912 as a traditional theatre, and has since grown to be one of the most influential companies in Japan, employing most of Japan's popular owarai (comedy) talent, producing and promoting the shows they appear in, and even maintaining its own amusement park.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoshimoto_Kogyo)

4. [Jump up ↑](#)

By Gay she means ‘Gei’, as in geisha, meaning art X’D

5. [Jump up ↑](#) Anton Wicky was apparently an English language educator on TV in Japan. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Wicky)

6. [Jump up ↑](#)

I think here he uses 'kougou sei', 'senior' high school student in Japan as opposed to 'junior high school', and the American 'high school' which covers both.

7. [Jump up ↑](#) A lake near Switzerland and Germany. Those who have read the Ojou-sama gaiden would understand its significance, heh.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Constance)

8. [Jump up ↑](#) An ice hockey player.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mike_Bossy)

9. [Jump up ↑](#) A football player.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_M%27Boma)

10. [Jump up ↑](#)

The Lady Borden Ice-Cream brand. Sigh, Shouri and these references...

11. [Jump up ↑](#)

Euro is probably pronounced 'Yuu-ro' here, pretty close to Yuuri.

MaruMA:Volume11:Chapter 5

Chapter 5

With the escort of the maidmer princesses and the manmer lords, we arrive at the Seisakoku port before sunset.

I've only ever seen Dejima^[1] in textbooks and periodic dramas, so I can't compare, but at least this is different from what I imagined, and the atmosphere is pretty peaceful too.

I can't hear the yells of traders here, neither do I see kids scampering across the roads. The camel-colored two-story brick buildings line the streets neatly and in order, but only a few of the shops are open for business, so there's not even a hint of the hustle and bustle of a port.

And yet, there are definitely a lot of people here, the passers-by on the roads being mostly healthy and friendly-looking adults. They smile at the foreigners going to customs, and a few of them say a few short words, probably greetings.

And they're just like the shinzoku we've seen before, with blonde hair so pale it's almost white, and their eyes are a pretty golden color too. People with dark hair and eyes are rare, so everyone looks surprised at our appearances at first, but there is no contempt in their reactions.

"What a relief, I was worried what to do if they treated us like rare animals!"

"Who knows, maybe the people of Dejima are used to contact with foreigners? And they should have received a certain degree of education. The deeper into the continent you go, the simpler the people."

Josak rolls up the sleeves on his apron, turning his head to look at me, who was sighing in relief,

"We can't judge a country by its main gates alone. At the very least we have to see the porch and back door."

“I see. You’re so smart! Josak.”

“Hehe, you really know how to win my heart, this is the first time in my life someone called me smart! But too bad, it has nothing to do with my wits, it’s actually the accumulation of experience. Oh, dear—actually it’s because I’ve been to a lot of places, though I was spending my boss’ money the whole time.”

“So you’re studying on scholarship? That makes you just like Mori Ogai^[2]~”

As a result he gives me an expression that says, that’s why I can’t just sit by and do nothing—Looks like I said something dumb again.

The customs officers who greet us ask us this and that as they help the tourists change clothes or wash up. These workers look around the same age as those young girls working in Japan, maybe it’s because their outfits and hairstyles are all uniform, every girl looks the same.

I observe closely for a while, and realize that there are duos who look the same everywhere.

That’s when I finally remember, that the rates of shinzoku having twins are really high. There are identical twins like Jason and Freddy who looks so similar it’s unbelievable; and though Zeta and Zuusha are sister and brother, they still look very similar. Although I haven’t seen the siblings of that girl and that helms expert, it’s highly likely that they were mingled with the group in that boat.

Speaking of which, I wonder where Jason and Freddy are forced to work at? I look around, trying to see if they’re among this group of girls. Not far away from me, though, Saralegui is causing a ruckus. Although he’s young, but he’s still the king of a country, for him to receive the same examinations at the customs like a normal visitor, must make him feel really insulted, huh? For all I know, being as composed and low-confidence like me is the problem here. Lord Weller is comforting him with a pained expression— it sure is tough to take care of others. I can’t help but smile bitterly, and only then do I realize that my mouth is so dry my tongue is almost glued to the ceiling.

It’s not just my throat that’s dry.

“Ah—I’m so hungry my vision is blurring”

“That’s bad, are you dizzy and nauseous? Should Gurrier apologize to everyone

out there who'd eating right now?"

"Although I'm nauseous, I can only puke out stomach acids. It should be okay! As long as we don't suddenly have to eat a full course French meal."

A pair of sisters come up to me with brand new white cloths, the girl on the eight smiling as she hands me the warm towels.

"Comment allez-vous? (French for How are you?)"

S-she's speaking French! Just when I'm at a loss about how to reply, she has already taken the steamed towel and is wiping my face—completely unafraid of my position.

"Azabu-jūban^[3]—Mn."

"That's the Toei Ōedo Line's... Mn..."

"Waa tai izzit nah? (What time is it now?)"

That is impossible. As I recall what I saw in my old man's Conversational English Booklet, I try to say 'saitsheeing (sightseeing)', and as a result the girl who was helping me tidy up actually blushed and ran away. Looks like she's not good at dealing with foreigners and strange accents.

The completely calm and collected spy Josak, on the other hand, easily solves the language problem. All he does is occasionally raise his palm and smile, occasionally make a 'fine, fine' movement, signaling for them to leave.

"That's amazing, Josak understands what they're saying?"

"How can that be—I'm just making weird gestures as I like! As long as I make such contradicting reactions, I'm sure even they will get a headache and find a translator."

"Impressive! Then let me make some weird gestures too."

And then I stick out my tongue, scaring three people to tears. Looks like my techniques still aren't up to par.

"Really, Young Master, Gurrier is an adult with a young girl's heart, you know."

And just as Josak said, the panicked translator immediately rushes over, so from now on the ones handling all our matters, are all bearded middle-aged

uncles, while those girls stay as far away from us as possible, treating us as people to pay special attention to.

One of the men has a name card saying, ‘Translator: Ajira’, though the third word is a mirror image of the real word. Behind those heavy lenses, his golden eyeballs are so big it’s scary. Looks like even shinzoku, seem to get short-sighted. He has a soft beard on his face and chin, looking as though there’s white mold growing there.

Following that man’s lead, we leave Dejima, and prepare to enter Seisakoku borders.

“You, horse?”

“Ah?”

I can’t help but want to ask him who’s the horse here. After a rather long time, we finally understand that he has a habit of abbreviating the verbs when he talks. Turns it he was asking, ‘You want to ride a horse?’ We left transport up to him, but the thing I’m more worried about is, does he understand what kind of a group we are?

At the exit of the port, there are people desperately waving. Normal people wouldn’t simply wave at the prime minister of another country, right? Even though they don’t have relations, Shou Shimaron is still a large country. Seeing that he doesn’t seem to be respected by the commoners here, Saralegui’s mood doesn’t seem too good.

Basically Seisakoku isn’t exactly what its name suggests, because this isn’t a place where all you see is sand.

There’s greenery between the mountains, and red earth along the roads. ‘In a white desert you can’t see in one glance, after experiencing the cruelest trip on camelback, finally reaching an oasis with one coconut tree...’ I was initially imagining a place a lot like the Sahara Desert, but the result is vastly different.

The temperature here is barely different from the harsh winters of Japan, though, even pulling up my collar can’t block out the cold winds blowing from all directions, and the air is extremely dry, too.

It could be because of the climate here, but there’s very little greenery on the

plains. Looking out the coach windows, I can only see very few places that could be called farms. Maybe this country isn't built on agriculture?

Not only is the scenery as we're moving vastly different from my imagination, even the first city that we finally arrive at, has a level of splendor that truly shocks us.

The buildings are all fixed and uniform, with not one house standing out. Because of the time, the shops haven't opened for business yet, but the windows of each house are brightly lit with lanterns, and steel gates that lead in and out line the smooth road. According to Ajira's proud explanation (though he still does away with the verbs), even the underground waterway and heating systems here are very complete.

What's even more surprising to us is, there isn't a wall surrounding the city.

The city area around Blood Pledge Castle, is surrounded by tall walls, mainly as a defense against thieves at night and enemy armies. But Seisakoku doesn't have city walls.

"So cool! Looks like the security here is very well maintained."

"Is that so~"

Josak mutters as he heads towards the place we're staying for the night. Right now he seems to be more nervous than he was at Dejima.

"Looks like that stretch of ocean should be a natural defense, huh... And also..."

"Josak, what's the matter? Look at you, stuttering like that. If you think anything's not right, could you please talk to me about it?"

"Right now it's still okay. Before the king here meets us, he would probably hope we're unharmed as well."

Seems like there's a double edge to his words. Based on many years as a spy, his sixth sense isn't something to be underestimated!

There are still three days and three nights to go, until the summit to be held in Seisakoku.

Although our traveling involves rushing in the day time, we stay in five-star

hotels at night, so even the extravagant greenhouse-flower Saralegui can't complain about it. As for me, ever since the second day after we landed, I haven't felt tired at all, instead I feel so energized I can't sleep.

Maybe it's because my inability to sit still has even been noticed by third parties, so not only Josak, but even Saralegui asks me if I'm unwell at some point.

"I'm guessing it might because I'm too wound up. Rather than call it gastric pains... it's more like I ate too much and feel tight in my chest."

"Could it be a cold? Maybe you were too worn out that time when we were drifting on the sea."

And sometimes I get headaches and horrible chills too, very evidently the pre-symptoms of a cold.

"Yuuri, I think you should ask the translator to help bring you some medicine! Although it's shinzoku medicine, it shouldn't be completely ineffective to mazoku."

"If I ask him to bring me medicine, but instead he gives me a cup of super-bitter tea, that'd be a bother. I'm okay, sheesh! I'll just ask him to bring an extra blanket... Sara, sorry, I made you worry."

Of course it's not as though I think the medicine here is ineffective, it's just the moment I hear about taking medicine, I remember Günter's advice, "Don't eat the food offered by strangers". As a principle I still eat the normal three meals, but I will never take any special food no one else has eaten. That's the most basic of precautions.

And I deduce that this sense of discomfort isn't a cold, but due to pressure. I've been in a series of emergency situations since Shou Shimaron, and I didn't have any friends during the voyage. Josak is definitely a comrade I can rely on, and is a trustworthy guard, but that's different from the sense of safety Wolfram gives me. Because we can't banter with each other, and comfort each other.

Although the things I'm worried about has lessened a little since we landed, but something else that makes me uneasy immediately appears—that is the stress from the summit that will I'll have to face soon.

After this I'll meet the king of an unknown country that I've never seen before,

and hold a talk with the reputation of two countries on the line. And this isn't a one-on-one summit either, the Shou Shimaron king will be present, too. Faced with two kings who have received the proper kingly training, is a normal high school student with no talents like me a worthy opponent?

After all half a year ago I was still a baseball boy like any other you could see on the street. Completely clueless about any diplomatic ways, much less any negotiation techniques. I'd much rather let that brother of mine, who bragged that he would someday be governor of Tokyo, take my place instead.

The strategist that I can rely on, Günter, isn't with me, and Murata, who can help me best at times like this is nowhere to be seen either. There's not a single person I can discuss this with beside me.

No wonder I feel the pressure piling on.

"I might get crushed to death by the pressure."

I mumble in a voice no one else can hear, and kick the floor of the coach once. Since this is the eve of the destined match, it's completely unsurprising that I feel this way. But a benchwarmer like me has almost never experienced any large-scale matches, just the EXP difference itself is huge.

"Yuuri, look! We can see the capital! Ah~ I'm so excited, I wonder what kind of a city has it become? Is the king here okay? Is the previous monarch healthy?"

Saralegui, who doesn't seem to know what pressure means, says happily as he leans out of the window.

Lord Weller, who has been quiet this whole time, advises in a monotonous voice,

"Your Majesty, it's best not to overthink things."

"But I'm really looking forward to it! My heart feels so excited."

His tone sounds like he's met the other person before... Speaking of which, he did mention on the voyage that that was his second time crossing that dangerous stretch of sea.

"Sara, you..."

Because of the improvement in the quality of the road, the speed of the

carriage starts picking up, too, making me swallow down my suspicions together with the sound of the wheels. Don't ask, so what if I know more about Saralegui's past? It'll just make me feel more regretful that I didn't learn the necessary knowledge, make me feel smaller.

The capital of Seisakoku, Yelshinrad, seems calm and carefree under the sparkling evening rays.

Faced with such huge, majestic buildings, we're completely shocked by its different style.

So this is the kind of the city they meant by a metropolis, this is the kind of country they meant by a powerful country...

"Impressive..."

The original color should be white or something pale, right? The orderly roads and walls have been dyed crimson by the sunset. The castle is in the heart of the city, just looking at the top of the tower forced me to crane my neck, the height itself leaves me at a loss for words.

There are streets leading into the city and away from the castle in every direction, all the buildings built around that center in a circle. If the Tang Dynasty's Chang'An looks like a chessboard, then this one...

"How to describe it... It's like a baumkuchen^[4]."

Why am I so unimaginative?

Looking at the city from the center tower, gives me the feeling of a solemn concerto getting louder and louder.

"Some people cry."

The translator, Ajira, is as simple and concise as ever. He probably means to say that 'Some people are so touched when they see the castle for the first time, they actually cry', right? I'm begging you, don't abbreviate that much!

In contrast to the happy and rowdy atmosphere, Saralegui has become quieter, he's probably very nervous too.

As for me, my gut and temple starts hurting, and I even feel cold sweat beading on my back and neck. To make sure no one else notices, I secretly wipe

my forehead. But the overwhelming pressure makes it hard for me to breathe, and I can no longer tell if it's gastric pains or something else, so I can't help but grip my chest tightly with my right hand.

Underneath the borrowed clothes, there's only my rapidly accelerating heartbeat.

"Yuuri?"

"Hm? Mn, what's the matter?"

There are four tall and intricately-carved pillars at the castle entrance. When I place my hand on the smooth surface, the coolness immediately moves to my arm through my fingers. The carved stone walls and ground sparkle, the pale green patterns indescribably beautiful.

In the past I've seen many mansions and castles, but compared to this palace, the extravagance is on a completely different level, even making me feel as though the Blood Pledge Castle we live in is a coarsely-built bunker.

Right then, in front of the people who looked like palace servants with their heads bowed, Saralegui says to me,

"Don't embarrass yourself in a place like this, 'kay."

And then that pretty face blooms into a smile.

The white face, pale-colored glasses, and slender limbs are all dyed by the orange backlight—making him look like he's bathed in fresh blood.

It's not the cold and not the overwhelming pressure, but an unknown reason that makes me sway on my feet, and as a result I miss a step on the not-too-high stairs. But before I can fall, a hand holds me up firmly.

"...Your Majesty."

It can't be, it's completely impossible.

My throat feels like it's being blocked by something heavy, and the oxygen can't get through my windpipe.

He is so friendly. He was always like that, and he should always be like that.

Why must I be so suspicious of everything? If I suspect everyone and

everything, then won't there be no end to it? But suspecting him is easier than trusting him.

"Your Majesty."

"Which 'Your Majesty' are you calling?"

I retort instinctively. Because that voice is Lord Weller's.

"You."

Conrad stands two steps above me, stopping me from saying any more, continuing what he wants to say. Because of the backlight, I can't see his light brown eyes—I hate the sunset like hell!

"Do you want to go back?"

Josak grabs my arm, and I push up against him forcefully. By now Saralegui has climbed up the stairs, and is looking back at us, left behind.

"If you're feeling uncomfortable, rest well tonight, and go tomorrow."

"How can I!"

I ignore their concerns, dashing up the two stone steps. Since I'm already here, how can I back down!

I really can't imagine what kind of impressive person my opponent is at all, but I still need to see if he's an enemy or a friend. Besides, I can't get rid of my doubts towards Saralegui in my heart, either. But he's only seventeen, if you just look at the number of years we've lived, there's not that much of a difference. Even if the things we learned are different, the times we've got to use those things should be the same. Since he can do it, I should be able to do it too.

Come on! Get into the batter's box. This isn't the practice field, this is the batter's box in an official competition. I'm going to use everything I have to take you down... Though whether I'll get a strikeout or not is another matter.

I turn around and look down from the top of the stairs, and the view really is very beautiful. Not only is it arranged perfectly, there isn't anything that stands out or doesn't fit, either. The people on the street dress and look almost exactly the same, and there are only two or three changes in color. If it was in this country, even if someone only wore their sports uniform every day, they could

still walk the streets proudly.

Just as I move my gaze back towards the castle—

A boy, junior elementary school age, scrambles over past the guard's attempts at stopping him. His pale grey cloths are short, revealing pale and bloodless arms and knees. The little boy suddenly bends down and uses a stone in his hand to draw a huge hexagon at his feet. Before the few soldiers can stop him, he's already connected the line.

I've seen that shape before, and instinctively I press my left arm beneath my clothes. The scratches underneath my fingers that were almost healed start hurting again. That was the mark left by that shinzoku girl with her short nails before we parted, and it came with the mysterious word, 'Venera'.

After the boy finishes drawing his hexagon, he starts singing. He sings a song I don't understand in a slightly off-key voice. But the tune seems familiar to me—it's a melody I know well.

"I feel as though... I heard it somewhere before."

"I heard it too."

"Then it has to be a Shin Makoku children's song..."

"But it's my first time hearing it."

The two mazoku exchange their opinions, but the boy, meeting opposition, chooses to continue singing in an even louder voice.

The soldier's actions are really rough—it's just a boy doodling around, but three of them are sent to pin him to the ground.

"Hey...!"

"Don't bully a little kid!"

Saralegui dashes up front even faster than I do, offering his hand to the boy gently, but as soon as he sees the dirty clothes and dusty hair, those beautifully manicured fingertips are immediately retracted.

"What! So it's just a worthless little brat."

"Sara?"

“Yuuri, ignore him. That’s the child of slaves.”

“Slaves... What are you saying, Saralegui! Such a small child is being handled violently, and you’re asking me to ignore him!? Don’t you see the army brutality!? Stop, let go of that kid...”

Just as I’m getting ready to push aside one of the guards, there’s a scream from behind the gathering crowd. Rather than fear, it’s more of a yell of disgust. The angry curses never stop, and add that to the horrible stench wafting around, the reason is quickly revealed.

As the crowd splits to the left and right, a trolley with a wooden bucket on top immediately tumbles down. The lid loosens off, and brown liquid spills onto the road. The intense odor makes it clear that that is ‘that thing’—though I don’t know if I should call it liquid organic fertilizer, or fertilizer distilled from feces.

Either way, everyone can’t use their noses to breathe at all.

The women’s screams urge the guards to rush over, and according to my own translation, they’re yelling, “Why is there a compost cart here!?” Next to the overturned cart there’s a petite person squatting there, head covered by a dirty hood. An old lady, looking extremely weak, raises her head as she’s scolded by the citizens and soldiers. The hair that’s plastered onto her forehead is too golden and bright, so it’s turned white. And it could be because of her too-advanced age, but her forehead and throat have obvious wrinkles.

She puts both palms on the cold floor, even peeking our way. Rather than saying she’s purposely looking at us, it’d be better to say her gaze just happens to move this way.

But in those zero point something seconds, Conrad, standing beside me, holds his breath in surprise, I know he’s holding back a name that almost escapes his lips, and he even grips his fist tightly. In a voice of surprise that the people can’t hear, he says,

“How is that possible...”

“Conrad?”

Just as I’m about to ask, “You guys know each other?”, I hear Saralegui interrupt my question in a tone of deep contempt,

“Stinky old hag!”

By the time we realized it, the boy had already made an escape when the old lady and her impressive stench distracted the guards. All that’s left is the symbol on the ground.

The hexagon like the one on my arm, a simple diamond sign.

1. [Jump up ↑](#) Dejima was a small fan-shaped artificial island built in the bay of Nagasaki in 1634 by local merchants. It remained as the single place of direct trade and exchange between Japan and the outside world during the Edo period, built to constrain foreign traders as part of sakoku, the self-imposed isolationist policy. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dejima>)
2. [Jump up ↑](#) A famous surgeon and poet, apparently he got a scholarship to study in Germany. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mori_%C5%8Cgai)
3. [Jump up ↑](#) A station along the Toei Ōedo Line, apparently.
4. [Jump up ↑](#) Baumkuchen is a German variety of spit cake. It is a traditional pastry in many countries throughout Europe and is also a popular snack and dessert in Japan. The characteristic rings that appear when sliced resemble tree rings, and give the cake its German name, Baumkuchen, which translates to "tree cake". (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baumkuchen>)

MaruMA:Volume11:Chapter 6

Chapter 6

“Emperor!?”

Why is it different from what I thought? So Seisakoku isn't a monarchy, but an empire?

After coming to the king's audience room deep within the palace, we finally learn about that from Ajira. Because he said, “Please wait here for His Imperial Majesty Yelshi to arrive.”

Since arriving here, this is my first time hearing my summit opponent's name, and the fact that he's not a king, but an emperor.

“Hey! Why didn't anyone tell me about this, huh? If so you should have said from the start this is the Empire of Seisa^[1]!”

“Young Master, why are you so freaked out? What's the difference between His Majesty the King and His Majesty the Emperor~ It's just the title that's a little different. And they don't place much emphasis on hereditary lineage here, so it's rather like our country!”

Josak's attitude sure is carefree.

“But the problem lies in that ‘a little’ difference!”

“Speaking of difference, this outfit has a lot of problems too, you know.”

He frowns, pinching the material on his shirt.

“Young Master too, such pale colors don't suit you at all. The way Gurrier sees it, if you were such coarse clothes to see the leader of another country, now that's a big problem! Really, I just want to take it all off and be done with it!”

“Don't be like that, d-don't mess around. If you do that, won't I be wearing ‘the King's New Clothes’?”

Although in the ‘King’s New Clothes’, that king gives the impression of being weak and stupid, but if you change king to emperor, for some reason it just gives a cool air like ‘Scarred Lola’^[2], I wonder why?

Although amongst the group of kings there’s also big names like Alexander, but because this noun was used too much in fairy tales, so it make people think of kindly old grandfathers. Once you mention an emperor, though, people like Napoleon or Nero come to mind, and you can’t think of them as gentle at all—I have a predisposed opinion when it comes to emperors, assuming that they’re either good at war or tyrants, so either way they’re scary people in power.

Just like there are emperor penguins and king penguins, and the former just gives you a stronger feeling.

If it was Murata, he would surely raise a few more examples like Beckenbauer^[3] and Michel Platini^[4], such names that I never heard before, huh? For all I know there’d be a general in the middle of all that.

Anyway, putting aside my petty concerns, we’ve come to the Seisakoku emperor’s audience room. The room is long and rectangular, while the painted-gold ceiling is arched like the bottom of the boat. The floorboards and walls are covered in mosaic, describing the history of the shinzoku according to the years. Just looking at these pictures makes you feel you shouldn’t simply step on them, so all of us have no choice but to push forward while jumping like frogs. Really, since it’s an important piece of art that should never be dirtied, you shouldn’t put it on the floor!

The drapes are slowly pulled open as the guards announce the arrival of the guards. I can vaguely sense someone sitting behind the veils.

All the symptoms of the pressure, heart-pulsing, breathlessness, gastric pains, headaches and chest-tightening, all ambush me at once.

Just then His Majesty Yelshi speaks up from behind the thin veils:

“Gasgabu?”

This emperor’s words really leave people at a loss. Even in this kind of situation, he still treats every word like gold, and his tone at the end is clearly questioning. According to my super translation skills, it’s ‘no need to be so

formal, come closer', but it's completely different to what the expert's translation is.

"Long trip?"

How very simple and concise.

"Ah! Thank you for your concern."

I don't know how to answer, so I sneak a glance at Saralegui. If you count the number of days we've been on the throne, he counts as my senior. But the young Shou Shimaron king doesn't particularly greet the other party, all I see is a hint of a smile on the corners of his lips.

True, after all we represent our respective countries too, so we can't act too submissive. A rookie king like me with so little experience it's pitiful, can only learn by experiencing it for myself.

The Seisakoku emperor continues with a longer speech than just now. Even if it's someone like me, who can use baseball metaphors and annoy the hell out of people, can't bring the baseball logic I'm so good at when talking to someone in long, foreign sentences. At times like this, it'd be best to rely on Anissina's pride and joy, her mysterious ma-powered devices.

"Regarding your visit, we feel very happy. Do you wish to drink anything?"

After hearing that completely normal translation, Saralegui suddenly relaxes his shoulders, a smile blossoming across his face,

"Heh, Yelshi."

He uses his white hands to push his hair behind his ears, and even a small gesture like that is still elegant on him.

"Yelshi, don't bother with those annoying formalities anymore, this is our long-awaited reunion after thirteen years, you know!"

The Shou Shimaron king says this cheerfully, and then, ignoring everyone else who's staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed, he reaches his hands out for the veil between us and His Majesty the Emperor.

"P-please wait!"

He disregards the opposition from the others, pulling aside the pale green veils as naturally as he would push aside his hair.

“Wait a sec, Sa... Eh?”

On the throne one step above us, there’s another Saralegui sitting there—No, to be precise there is a little difference. The hair that brushes his shoulders is shorter than Sara’s, and he doesn’t have pale-colored glasses to hide his light-sensitive eyes. But the two of them can’t simply be described as ‘very similar’.

They’re practically twins.

“So...”

My voice is so hoarse it gets stuck in my throat.

So that’s it! When I turn around to look, I see that even Josak and Lord Weller look fairly surprised. Even the two younger guards awaiting orders in the room can’t hide the wavering of their hearts. The only ones who look unaffected are the slightly older ones.

Saralegui takes off the glasses he usually wears, opening his arms to the emperor of Seisakoku.

“Yelshi, long time no see. You’ve grown so big! Well, that’s unsurprising, after all we’re not kids anymore.”

And with that he runs towards the young king, using equally slender arms to hug his petite body.



“We lived separately, so we may not look exactly the same. What do you think,

Yuuri?”

Two pairs of identical eyes look at me. One pair is completely emotionless, while the other pair of golden eyes is sparkling with joy.

“I wonder, do we still look very similar?”

I’m so surprised I’m beyond reacting.

That’s right, didn’t I know this a long time ago?

There are a lot of twins among the shinzoku.

1. [Jump up ↑](#)

Seisakoku means Holy Sand Country, so he meant Seisa-teikoku(?), Holy Sand Empire.

2. [Jump up ↑](#) Kizudarake no Lola, a song by Saijo Hideki.

3. [Jump up ↑](#) A German football player and manager nicknamed Der Kaiser, or the Emperor. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Beckenbauer)

4. [Jump up ↑](#) A French footballer, Wikipedia says his nickname was the King, but my raws translated that as General...? (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Platini)

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Chapter 7

Their only difference is the length of their hair and their clothes.

Looking at the brothers sitting side by side, I think: If they wore the same clothes, it'd be impossible to tell them apart, wouldn't it? If I had to differentiate between one and the other, I'd say the younger brother Yelshi is a bit like an emotionless doll, but that's still within an acceptable margin of error. If he stepped down from the throne, he would surely have emotions as well.

"I was born in this country."

Saralegui smiles, holding the hand of the brother he hadn't seen for thirteen years. Yelshi just looks at him wordlessly, though the two of them seem to be able to communicate without words.

"Back then, Father was leading the Shou Shimaron army, and got injured in the sea nearby, staying in this country to heal his wounds. That was when he and Mother fell in love."

Saralegui, on the other hand, looks a little shy talking about his own mother's love life. After all that's happened, I'm even more surprised at that, who knew he would have that sort of emotion too!

"During that time, my uncle ruled Shou Shimaron. But when we turned four, as the older brother I had practically no houryoku at all, so I had no choice but to leave the country. You guys might not know this, but quite a few shinzoku children have powerful houryoku. And most would show the symptoms when they were really young. You may not believe this..."

Saralegui laughs as he shrugs, and we, sitting on the other end of the wide table, can only wait for him to continue.

"But children with houryoku, even when they sleep, the bed will float in the air with them."

“Sure sounds like something out of a horror movie.”

“For all I know, mazoku children have similar experiences. Yuuri, what about you?”

The two people without any maryoku beside me look unconcerned. But when it comes to mazoku who could cause interesting phenomena like that, I can only think of Miss Anissina. But if it was Lady Cherie, it might be something like waking up in the morning, to find a handsome hottie sleeping beside her for some unknown reason, or a ma-powered experience like that.

“But, you can’t leave Seisakoku just because you don’t have houryoku, right? Sure, it’s convenient to have houryoku, but even if you don’t it won’t affect your daily life, will it?”

“In this country...”

Saralegui raises the glass in front of him to moisten his throat. The skin on his neck is so white it makes me suspect if I can see the grape-colored drink through it. If my mom were to describe it, it’d be like the seaweed in our breakfast miso soup... This simile has been used too many times.

Yelshi finishes the liquid in his cup at the same time. Twins are really impressive. I feel that even without houryoku, they should have some other mysterious, natural-born power.

I don’t know what’s that liquid filling the cups, maybe emperors like high class grape wine? But I haven’t drunk a sip of it.

“In this country, people who can’t use houjutsu can’t become shinzoku. Our first ancestor was born from the blood of gods, so anyone who can’t use the houjutsu of the gods and their followers, will be treated as not a real shinzoku and thus despised by everyone.”

Saralegui states mildly, as though it’s nothing to do with him.

“It doesn’t matter how high your status is, there are no exceptions, only the slaves in this country don’t have houryoku. The opposite is true too, a baby born in a slave family, as long as they have strong houryoku, can get the same treatment as a future citizen. And if they’re willing to serve the country, they may even be promoted to a full-fledged soldier or official—just like the translator

standing over there.”

Seeing someone suddenly point his way, the translator almost jumps in surprise, even his eyebrow-shaped white moustache stands on end.

“Because he naturally has the power to translate foreign languages!”

“Eh! Then wouldn’t anyone strong in languages...”

I am irresistibly reminded of Anissina.

“As a young child I had practically no houryoku. When my mother found out about that, she wanted to wipe away my existence. Because she’s a woman with strict demands, if I continued staying in this country, I’d probably have to live with the slaves, huh. Oh, yeah, how is Mother these days?”

Upon hearing Saralegui’s question, Yelshi shakes his head, his hand held tightly in Saralegui’s. I can see their lips moving, but their voices don’t reach all the way here.

“Is that right, she’s not doing too well, huh... Then even if you tell here I came, she wouldn’t be able to tell what’s going on, huh? After all in her heart she’s long since gotten rid of her other son.”

“Aren’t you mother and son by birth!?”

I ask without thinking, how can there be such a cruel mother? Saralegui, though, replies noncommittally,

“We’re mother and son, that’s right.”

Just because of that superpower that doesn’t make a difference even if you don’t have it, she doesn’t acknowledge her own child. The society here is just too illogical, isn’t it? Although my mom always sighs, “You are your mother’s child, so you shouldn’t be so unpopular,” but there’s still a small difference in the tone and meaning.

“But Saralegui, why didn’t you mention to me that you were born in Seisakoku? Not only that, back when we were in Shou Shimaron, didn’t you say that be it your country or yourself, this is your first time contacting Seisakoku?”

This means that throughout that long journey before, he was always lying to me.

“Yuuri, I never lied to you. That’s because all that happened when I was young, so I don’t have any recollection of it myself.”

“Even so, you can’t have been completely out of contact these past thirteen years, right? Not only are you twins, one of you was the prince of your father’s country, and the other was the prince of your mother’s country, right? Even if there’s no diplomatic relation between the two countries, you should at least be able to communicate, right?”

“We did communicate after I ascended the throne, yeah.”

“During that time, Seisakoku was under lockdown, wasn’t it? I say, Sara, if you keep lying like this, careful you don’t become ‘the boy who cried dog’!”

Lord Weller knocks my stomach lightly, whispering,

“Sheep.”

“Eh, is it? Wasn’t it dog?”

“I like dogs! But I like elephants even more~”

“Oh, yeah, there’re elephants too. If you keep lying like this, your nose will grow longer, you know! When it does, then you’ll regret it!”

The men on both sides cover their faces with their hands exasperatedly.

“That’s something else altogether.”

“You guys sure get along well.”

Watching our comedy trio performance, Saralegui smiles lightly. That pair of brothers, though, be it in appearance or personality, they do have a slight difference. Compared to the open and active older brother, the younger brother is obviously much more reserved. Seeing Yelshi act so docile and honest, my ‘emperor image’ for the past sixteen years is practically shattering into pieces. But then that quiet little brother suddenly speaks up,

“Actually...”

“Eh? You understand our language?”

I’m taken completely by surprise, turns out Yelshi used the aforementioned translation houjutsu. But I feel he’s just an emperor who worked hard to learn

foreign cultures. He raises his head to look at us, face to face, and his golden irises suddenly become darker.

“No, communication. Until two years ago. Until now still, lockdown.”

“It’s just as he said, Mother is very strict with her demands. Even if she misses her previous lover, she wouldn’t open relations between the two countries for something as trivial as love.”

Her personality is the complete opposite of our previous Queen, surely the two of them would never get along.

I touch the champagne glass in front of me lightly, its surface looks moist due to the condensation on the sides. The weather outside is cold and windy, but it’s way too warm inside the palace.

“Saralegui, I really can’t understand... Oh, right, then should I call your younger brother His Majesty the Emperor?”

“I think it doesn’t matter what you call him, right? After all he’s not familiar with the common language.”

That’s what he said, but to call someone I’m not close with by their name directly, I just can’t do that.

“Although we’re of the same age, the basic manners still have to be there. Speaking of which, I just don’t get it, why does Seisakoku have to stay under lockdown? Although your parents are from different countries, but they are still married, right? Isn’t this the best chance to open up your gates?”

After hearing his brother’s reply, Saralegui translates for us,

“It’s probably because they don’t need to import or export. This country has the capability to provide for itself, and they’re really happy with the way things are, too.”

“...But, changed.”

Yelshi seems to reply immediately after his older brother. Although it’s just a few simple words, his tone carries an unwavering determination.

“Now isn’t Mother’s era anymore.”

“That’s right, Yelshi, from now on it’s our era!”

The twin brothers hold each other’s shoulders lightly.

“From now on it’s your and my era! We don’t need Father or Mother to intervene, the era of Shou Shimaron and Seisakoku is upon us. Although there’s still Dai Shimaron behind us, but as long as you and I are as one, that era will come soon enough.”

The younger brother listens to his older brother’s words, nodding in approval.

Watching this scene in front of me, I get an odd feeling, as though I’m watching clones in a prank. Are they really separate beings? It couldn’t be that there’s a giant mirror in front of Saralegui, could it? I keep feeling as though one of them is a reflection, lacking depth and warmth, while the other is the real person...

“You see.”

The younger brother stands up suddenly, holding his brother’s hand as he walks across the room and opens the large window, revealing a balcony that allows us to enjoy the courtyard below. Our gazes follow his downwards, and see an armed platoon walk into the square.

Turns out they’re fully armed soldiers, more than one thousand or two thousands of them. The squad stretches past the wide center court, all the way out of the large gates. The silver armor and unsheathed weapons, under the last rays of the setting sun, sparkle bright red, looking just like the color of blood.

Seeing their Emperor appear together with Saralegui, the atmosphere on the scene immediately boils over, not only do they hammer their swords, spears, shields and other metallic weapons, they also start loudly praising their king.

With, Yelshi, between his fingers!

With, Yelshi, between his fingers!

I’m shocked by their earth-shaking and passion—

“S-sorry, no matter how I listen I still hear them yelling, ‘between his fingers’.”

No matter how touching it is, the effect is dampened by that kind of slogan.

“That’s what foreign languages are like.”

Josak, who’s long since used to foreign cultures, knocks me on the back and says,

“Thank goodness it just sounds like between his fingers, don’t you agree, Young Master?”

“That’s right, stuff like that normally can’t be said in front of people.”

Yelshi’s excited face is reddened, as he waves back at everyone indulgently. Saralegui watches him wave from the side, basking in his glory, then turns around to look my way and says,

“Lord Weller, seems like the truths you must report to Dai Shimaron have expanded a little more.”

The Dai Shimaron ambassador who was called out, wordlessly waits for him to continue.

“You can tell Berard the Second: Shou Shimaron and Seisakoku join forces, amassing a huge military power. But first you must be able to go back and report that.”

With that he grabs the emperor’s arm, and forcefully pulls him into the room. The yells of ‘With, Yelshi, between his fingers!’ rage on, and don’t seem to be stopping any time soon.

“And then tell him: Shou Shimaron have negotiated with Shin Makoku, and signed a deal with the mazoku. But first you have to see if you can report that too, of course! Oh, yeah, Yuuri—”

“Waa! Mn, w-what’s the matter?”

Unconsciously I had gotten caught up in the atmosphere, so when I reply I stutter a little.

Saralegui continues smiling that smile I saw when we first met, and then he puts his hand on the table. Underneath his slender white fingers is a pale blue piece of paper.

“As the king of Shou Shimaron, I hope to sign a contract with His Majesty the 27th Maou of Shin Makoku.”

The two of them are even equal in height, and when they stand together, the two faces are at the exact same height. The older brother's mouth curves into a brilliant smile, while the younger brother appraises me and the paper on the table seriously. Seeing their completely different attitudes, that's when I really feel it deeply, 'Ah~ The two of them really are separate individuals.'

Maybe it's so he can read the tiny writing, Saralegui is wearing his glasses even indoors. As long as they're covered with those pale-colored glasses, I can't see the original color of his eyes.

"Shou Shimaron does not wish for the relationship with the mazoku to worsen. I hope that as long as we don't interfere with each other's territory, we can maintain a semi-permanent, peaceful relationship, do you agree?"

"That really is... more than I can hope for."

If Saralegui's sincere about it, that would be a miracle ball directly in the strike zone.

If he's sincere...

"Then please sign here."

Saralegui scrutinizes the tiny-worded document from top to bottom, his beautiful finger stopping on an empty box at the very bottom.

"Then I'll start."

A servant with no sense of presence respectfully offers the stationary. He acts as though he's offering some great gift, but all that lies in his palms, held together, is a pen. Saralegui takes it and signals for him to leave, then grabs the glass on the table and smashes it, using the glass shard to cut open his pinky unhesitatingly.

"Your turn, Yuuri."

"Alright, wait a..."

"This is too premature."

Lord Weller suddenly interrupts. To the suzerain of Shou Shimaron—Dai Shimaron, if their vassal state were to sign a treaty on their own, it would definitely cause them a lot of trouble.

“Your Majesty Saralegui, if you don’t give the other party a chance to confirm the contents and think about it closely before forcing them to sign, it’s not impossible for the other party to declare the contract null in the future.”

“You sure are desperate, aren’t you, Lord Weller?”

The king of Shou Shimaron can’t help but laugh out loud, and then he hands the pen and document to me.

“Do you think that if you step out to stop him, Yuuri won’t sign this contract?”

Saralegui’s words have double meanings as he stops Lord Weller, after all he’s seen some certain things that happened on the ship. I, on the other hand, wanted to take the pen and sign, but maybe it’s because I’m too nervous, but I tried and failed twice in a row.

“No, you’re wrong, I won’t give up signing just because a certain someone stops me. But right now someone has stopped me, so I won’t sign before I understand the contents of the contract. W-wait a while for me, I’ll just look through the contract once. I’ll confirm the contents first, if there’s anything illogical in the contents, won’t it be a pain later?”

This isn’t a record card of a competition, neither is it the name list for tomorrow’s starting lineup, but it’s an important document regarding the fate of an entire country. That’s why I need to take my time and read it carefully, it doesn’t matter even if you want me to stay up all night.

But my gaze following the tiny words immediately stops.

“Your Majesty?”

I stare at Josak, his expression full of suspicion.

“What a bother... This is written in the Seisakoku language.”

In front of me is nothing but foreign words I’ve never seen before. If it was the common language we used, I can still pick out the words I understand. But these unique handwritten words that look like a montage of a bird flying presented in simple lines, to someone like me who doesn’t know translation maryoku, it might take a fairly long time to decipher. Save me, Miss Anissina!

“How can I possibly understand this? Why isn’t it written in our usual

language, but written instead in a language only this land uses?”

“It's so that Seisakoku, as an impartial third party, can serve as a witness in the peace treaty between both countries. That's why I had the draft written in this country's language. I had it written like this so that Emperor Yelshi can serve as a witness. I didn't think that you wouldn't bring a translator with you, but after all it turned out like this because of a sudden twist in events, so it can't be helped. If you're okay with it, shall I recite it for you?”

“A-anyway please read the basic outline for me, later I will borrow a dictionary and slowly look it up.”

I raise my right hand to press against my temple, my headache's getting worse and worse. Maybe my actions surprised him, because Saralegui chuckles lightly before reading out the basic outline of the document.

“It's basically like this: Shou Shimaron and Shin Makoku will henceforth be equals, there will be no difference in status between the two...”

Just then there's suddenly the 'ker-dong' of a chair falling. Everyone's gazes gather on the young Emperor Yelshi, who's standing there motionlessly, his originally white face now even more bloodless.

“It can't be, right?”

“Yelshi?”

He grips his fist tightly, saying through shaking lips,

“It can't be... Sara, didn't you say the mazoku... were to obey... Shou Shimaron...”

“Yelshi, it's not like that!”

“But...”

“Hey, Sara, what are you guys saying?”

Breaking free from his brother's grasp, the younger brother bends over and reaches his hand out to snatch away the document. The glass is knocked aside by the impact, the liquid inside spilling all over the tablecloth, dampening the pale blue sides, and then rapidly spreading.

“But, isn’t this so that Sara’s country can be strongest power, that’s why... Ah!”

Before Yelshi’s hand can touch the document, he loses his balance and falls to his knees. He holds the left side of his face, raising his head to look at his older brother with a gaze of disbelief. Turns out Saralegui gave him a slap, but he immediately kneels down, putting his hand on his younger brother’s shaking shoulders, and another hand plastered to his younger brother’s swollen red cheek, caressing it lightly,

“Yelshi, I didn’t hit you because I hate you, please forgive your older brother, I was just scared by your pure heart. I’m so scared I’ll lose the younger brother I finally got back just like that.”

Saralegui keeps comforting his younger brother, who’s even more pure and straightforward than he is. Finally the younger brother seems to understand his older brother’s intentions, and nods lightly.

“I’m not, angry.”

“Thank goodness.”

The younger brother’s hands fall to his sides, and he doesn’t touch his face any more. Poor thing, surely the damage dealt to his heart, must be a lot of intense than the physical pain.

But now I finally understand the contents of the contract, so I must thank His Majesty the Emperor for that.

“Sara—”

“Please don’t hate me, Yelshi.”

Josak purposely clears his throat, as though he’s interrupting a conversation between lovers.

“I’ll clarify this beforehand.”

The spy says “After all letting outsiders see your brotherly conflict isn’t very nice” as an opening, and then explains a little about foreign culture.

“The two of you should be real grateful you’re shinzoku. If you were mazoku, this would have become a marriage proposal between twins—and then we’d be

in a legendary complicated situation... What a bother, they don't understand."

The shinzoku brothers act all unconcerned about it. I lower my head, watching the way they protect each other and seem to get along so well, and, thinking that something's really wrong about this, I ask in a serious tone,

"Saralegui, what on earth is written there?"

The surface of the paper I grab is rather smooth, it should count as high quality paper in this world, huh. Since it's for a contract, of course they'd use high quality paper! But this piece of paper has been dyed purple from the right corner to the middle.

"Can't you say it, Saralegui?"

The Shou Shimaron king's signature has been stained beyond recognition.

"Yuuri, what he said just now was fake. Yelshi isn't that familiar with diplomatic matters, he thought the draft we did beforehand was the final product."

"Don't kid with me!"

"It's true, I'm not kidding, you know! This contract..."

"The truth is nothing you said about what's in there is true, right!?"

The white fingers grab the table cloth forcefully. Those lips, as beautiful as flower petals, twist due to the change in his emotions. Those irises staring straight at me, because of the pale-colored glasses, their color can't be determined. So I've been completely fooled by this honest-looking appearance, of someone who's similar in age to me and yet cheerfully working his best to rule a large country. But now that I really think about, it was all probably his act.

I wasn't betrayed, I was conned.

This is all my fault for being too stupid.

"I don't know what kind of tricks you played, but you brothers are in it together to trick me into signing an equality treaty, so you guys can have all the benefits, right? Because you know that the king of Shin Makoku is a big, stupid rookie. That's right, I'm as stupid as a rookie, but I never thought that you'd look down on me that much, and you still think I'll be fooled by your simple tricks, I

truly feel so bad I wanna cry!”

Just then there’s the sound of what might be Josak unsheathing his sword. That was the first threat.

“But, so sorry, Saralegui. Even if your plan succeeded, and I accidentally signed on that stained piece of paper, Shin Makoku won’t idiotically obey that contract. After I go back, there are many, more capable people who can take my place.”

“I don’t mind that, Yuuri.”

Saralegui raises his chin, his hands on his hips as he stands crookedly. There’s even an arrogant smile on his lips, the piteous look from before long gone. The one before me, is a cocky, unwavering, yet earthly king. Although he’s just a teenager, his smile now makes him feel old and cunning.

“Even if those ministers you’re so proud of go against the contract, I don’t mind, because then I can use this excuse to declare war. If Shin Makoku deny the contents of the contract and start a war themselves, even better. This way we won’t be criticized by the other countries, and we can start a war with our heads held high, so we’ll definitely win.”

“You...”

“I won’t be as daft as Father’s generation, signing that sort of half-assed contract. If it was me, I’d definitely beat the other side up until they can never rise again.”

My stomach starts heating up, until I feel like smoke will billow out from my ears. Not only am I angry at Saralegui, whose attitude has made a completely one-eighty, but I’m also angry at myself for being fooled by this guy’s flowery words. I naturally lower my voice,

“In your plan, how did you mean to deal with me?”

The boy whose parents are a king and queen respectively, says the scary words unhesitatingly.

“I planned for you to die, y’know!”

After saying that softly, he takes back the document in my hands. He reads it again, lamenting the failure of his plan. But he looks very happy.

“My plan was to let you die in a little accident after signing the contract—the seas around us are just like that torrent, so nothing’s impossible. But that was the initial plan, after sailing with you, I changed my mind. Because I found out that the Maou really is very interesting. So I planned to leak the false information of your unfortunate death, and then keep you here.”

He sighs in a tone of endless regret,

“I wanted to keep you as a pet.”

Although that sounds like his sincere thoughts, but he is after all the man made out of lies, so not a single word he says should be true.

“As long as Shin Makoku thinks you’re dead, things will go as I said, your ministers or the next king would probably immediately declare war, huh? Even if the truth leaks out, and they know you’re still alive, then you’ll still be the best hostage possible.”

“Too bad, Saralegui, but I won’t be killed or imprisoned!”

The Shou Shimaron king, immersed in his dastardly plot, reaches his hand for me lightly. The neatly manicured pale pink nails slide down my cheek to my chin.

“Yuuri, it’s not too late to turn back now. It doesn’t matter even if you know the plan, don’t you want to work together with me? All you have to do is sign on the contract, and I’ll let you go back, then you just have to convince those mazoku. This way you can maintain that peace you want, and can get a portion of the power. What do you think? Not a bad plan, right?”

“You want Shin Makoku to become a vassal state of Shou Shimaron?”

“That’s right. Not only Shou Shimaron, but even the Seisakoku that you see will eventually become mine. Do you know what power this country has? Manpower and houseki in abundance, so there’s no shortage of soldiers and weapons. And most of the people here are excellent houjutsu users; as for the slaves that usually can’t be used, I just have to train them to use the sword, then they should be able to work as disposable pawns on the battlefield. This country itself is an endless treasure trove, Yuuri.”

Kneeling on the ground, Yelshi’s expression suddenly brightens, maybe it’s because he put together the words he can understand, and misunderstood that

Saralegui is praising his country, huh? If he can understand this completely, he would probably be very disappointed in his older brother's words.

"Of course you can continue being your Maou, and you can be the king of the second largest country in the world, too. If you want, the Weia Islands that belong to Shou Shimaron, and that annoying Hyscliff land can all go to you. As long as our three countries work together, then even Dai Shimaron wouldn't dare try anything. And then that would be our era—one where no one gets hurt, the era that belongs to us."

"That isn't our era!"

The bottom of my spine suddenly heats up, my ears whirring in rhythm with my accelerating heartbeat.

"Saralegui, that's just your own delusions."

I suddenly feel as though the friendship I felt from this man, is already a thing of the distant past. And all of it was a lie, there was never any friendship between us.

"Too bad, but usually it's the Maou who makes that offer to the hero. The pattern is the same in every game. Do you know why?"

I knock Saralegui's finger off my chin.

"Because it's fun that way."

In the back I hear the "clink" sound of the handle hitting the sheath again. That was the second threat.

"Saralegui, your plan isn't fun in the slightest, it's too self-centered. I want to quit, I can't go along with Shou Shimaron's game."

The threat this time finally forces Sara to snap his fingers for the servants and soldiers awaiting orders in the room. Including those completely unarmed, there are at most less than twenty of them. With these numbers alone they shouldn't be Josak's match—as long as Lord Weller doesn't fight as our enemy. Also, as long as I don't lose control and go on a rampage like a bawling baby out of rage.

That's the most dangerous thing. There's a special kind of pain near my lower abdomen. Before it rushes up my spine and controls my brain, I must find a way

to suppress it with my own power—take deep breaths, try to break apart the gathering power.

“I don’t think that these few people can take you down either. Besides, I even let that exceptionally strong guard of yours carry a weapon and attend, so of course I made other preparations beforehand!”

The boy king turns around and gives his kneeling little brother the warmest smile, holding out a hand to help him to his feet, and calls his name in a gentle voice.

“Yelshi.”

And then he gives an order in the language we don’t understand.

“This child is an excellent houjutsu user, and it’s because he has houryoku, that he was chosen as Mother’s heir. He could use the houjutsu to control houseki however he liked even when he was just an infant.”

Just then, there’s an intense pain in my right pinky, as though it’s about to be bent in half at the roots.

“What...”

“Your Majesty!?”

I hear Josak and Conrad yelling my name, as I slump into kneeling on the ground. Completely unable to stand, I carefully look between the fingers I’m gripping tightly, only to see the pale red ring I’m wearing on my right pinky emit a faint light, while the pain it brings is even more intense than its glow.

The screams I can’t suppress leak out through my tightly clenched teeth.

“Your Majesty! Take it off, quickly!”

I grip my pinky and ring finger tightly, bending my back to hold the part that hurts. The insides of my eyeballs keep heating up in their sockets, the tears even flying out, and then someone says in my ear, “It’ll be easier if you yell”, but I can’t tell anymore if it was Conrad or Josak.

“Have you forgotten, Yuuri? We’re friends, so we exchanged the ring and necklace. I took my long-estranged mother’s houseki to trade with your maseki. That’s the ring my beloved mother, who despised me and pretended I didn’t

exist, left for me, you know! No matter how you look at it, I still think this maseki of yours is more valuable.”

Saralegui takes the blue maseki down from around his neck, solemnly untangling the hair that wrapped around it, and then dangles it at eye-level,

“So pretty. There’s even something like a crest engraved on it.”

My tears drip in front of my knees.

“But I don’t need it anymore.”

He’s just like a kid who got tired of a toy, throwing the maseki and the stone away, All I see is the maseki reflecting the newly-risen moonlight, sparkling once before falling out the window. And I can only watch it disappear in despair, only watch as that maseki that I kept hanging in front of my chest for so long disappear from sight.

“I advise you to take that ring as soon as possible, too! Don’t worry about me.”

“...How do I... remove...”

No matter how I pull and tug at it, that coral-like ring just won’t budge from my pinky. The skin around it has already been tugged at until the skin broke, bleeding. Saralegui, who knew this would happen, laughs,

“Easy, just chop off your finger with it.”

Right then I want to do just that, so my hand reaches for Conrad’s sword. But he grabs me immediately, forcing me to give up that notion.

“You can’t!”

There’s no time to listen to him, so I quickly turn around, and reach my hand out for Josak’s short sword, right then he has his arm around my back. But he doesn’t stop me, instead roaring at Saralegui,

“Is it that emperor’s doing? Is that guy doing something to the stone!?”

Yelshi, obeying his brother’s orders, approaches me unconcernedly, looking at my expression of pain with one of disbelief. He pushes his hair behind his ear in the same movement as Saralegui’s, touching my shoulder with his fingertip, seemingly shocked. Although my pain doesn’t stop increasing, I still can’t help

but respect the fact that even the color of their fingernails is the same.

I get up with a speed so fast even I can't believe it, pulling out the sword at Josak's waist, pointing the tip at Yelshi's throat. But even in the face of this situation, he still has a clueless expression on his face, like a newborn lamb who doesn't know what fear is.

"Yuuri, do you want to kill me? You, who was always so gentle, want to kill him?"

Hearing Saralegui's words, the few Seisakoku soldiers pull out their swords and get into their stances in unison. It's okay whatever they want to do, after all Conrad will help me deal with them.

"Your Majesty, allow me."

"N-no... We can't."

I shake my head continuously. But not at Josak, at my own inner thoughts. He is after all the emperor of this country, if anything happens to him, then what!?

"Stop!"

As I yell that out loud, I throw away the sword as well. Only killing him will get me out of this torture, and to break free from that temptation, I need an immense effort. The clanging of metal rings out in the tense atmosphere.

"Don't... kill him..."

I order myself again, but without someone to support me and my feet stumbling over each other, I fall back a few steps.

"Your Majesty!"

There isn't a wall behind me, and the balcony railing I finally touch is round and thick, so my fingers, scalding hot with pain, can't get a grip on them at all. In that second I could still wonder how many stories this is, but before I get an answer, my entire body is already flying mid-air.

It won't hurt anymore.

All that's left is to fall, just like that time.

translation: novel 11, chapter 8

By request, the coffin scene! Heheh... Yes, that would be the coffin scene that Sara stole away from Conrad in the anime.

[rel="nofollow">This one.](#)

This is a rough translation of the last chapter of novel 11. There are probably a bunch of mistakes here, eep! I just continued on after the coffin part because it was so interesting. I haven't read the rest of the novel, so there are few plot things that won't make sense and that I can't explain yet. (Though I'll try my best to clear up stuff if you have questions.) Basically, Yuuri passed out in the previous chapter, and he wakes up in the coffin with Conrad. They're making an escape, but Conrad is still with Dai Shimaron at this point.

There's also another ConYuu-ish scene toward the end, and overall it's got some...very interesting dynamics between Josak, Conrad, and Yuuri. ~~The kind of dynamics that make me want to scream~~ "Aw yeah, threesome!" really loudly.

My throat and the back of my eyes really hurt.

It's just like, right before you come down with the flu, one of the symptoms is that the pressure in your eyes increases. My mother says that it's because too much blood is flowing in the capillaries around the eyes that it feels like there's smoke in them and you can't stop tearing up. At this time, it'll hurt too much to open my eyes, but I can't keep them closed, either. If I keep my eyelids

shut like this, I'll definitely fall asleep.

That's why I've made up my mind to open my eyes.

I had no idea it would be darkness all around, or that the ceiling would be unusually low. It kind of feels like there's not enough air in here.

My right hand is still a little numb; I can't feel anything when I try to wiggle my fingers, as if it's not my own hand. When I could lift it with great difficulty, I hit a wooden board. The impact caused some joints to creak, but luckily it doesn't seem as if there's anything wrong with my bones. If I had broken them, I probably couldn't even move a centimeter. This is considered great luck in the middle of really bad luck.

"Are you awake?"

Perhaps he felt me moving around, but there was suddenly someone next to me, speaking softly. I was just thinking that I should say that, though it's a bit of a tight squeeze in here, it's also quite warm, so there must be someone leaning against me. Looks like I don't have to worry about being the only person in this cramped place.

"...Conrad?"

"Yes."

"What is this place?"

"Inside a coffin."

"Oh, no! I've kicked the bucket!"

"No."

The shaking of his abdominal muscles hits my elbow, so I

immediately know that he's holding back his laughter.

"So that's why the ceiling is so low, and I'm sharing a coffin with you... How did this happen? What - aren't there enough coffins in

the world anymore?"

"It's not like that; you're not dead!"

Then why am I in a coffin... Before I can even speak, the back of my head smacked against the wall. Our wooden crate is swaying a lot. Could it be that we're being transported somewhere? I almost bit my tongue.

"Why is it swaying?"

"Don't speak."

I can hear the dialogue coming through from the other side of the wooden boards - it's Seisakoku's language. A man with an extremely arrogant, loud tone is blaming another person.

"That's probably a guard on patrol. It's also possible that he's here on an inspection. If the coffin is opened, please try to play dead."

"Got it, I'll try to play dead. Whoooooa, that's not right. Even if that's what you say, the problem here is that this is a coffin designed for one person, and there are two people in it. How can that look normal?"

"Josak is in the coffin before us, so it'll be all right. Shh!

Don't speak!"

Right now, I can hear rustling cloth and hinges creaking. The coffin in front, where Josak is lying in, is being opened. Good luck, Josak!

The quieter it is, the more I want to sneeze. Luckily, I don't have allergies, and there aren't any flies or mosquitoes buzzing around in this tiny space. But, what's giving me trouble is that I'm going to hiccup. Even if I want to hold my mouth shut with my hand, that's not possible because I can't move my hands. Just as I

couldn't hold it in anymore, a palm that wasn't mine pressed against my throat and mouth. The coolness of the touch suppressed the urge to hiccup.

As I hold my breath, I finally hear the sound of the neighboring coffin being firmly shut, and the cloth covering the coffin is put back in place. Now there's a loud wailing coming from outside, but I know that it's just the sound of the examiner puking his guts out after he saw the corpse. Suddenly, I want to laugh instead of hiccup.

They saw Josak pretending to be dead. How depressing was his expression as he laid in the coffin? It looks like Gurrier is truly a star actress.

After a while, as the cargo carriage started to slow down, we both let out a long sigh of relief at the same time.

"Good, it looks like they fell for it."

"How in the world did this happen? Why are we together in... Didn't I fall from the balcony?"

When that last thought came to me, everything gradually fell into place in my mind like a chain reaction. I also remembered that I'm not on polite terms with Lord Weller.

"I'm strangely uninjured after falling out of a window and onto the stones of the courtyard. That's way too lucky."

"You fell into this freight car! You just made it into a bale of hay."

What, so I don't get to rank among the people in the exceptional narrow escapes TV program?

"Gurrier and I jumped down soon after. Fortunately, we found you before the city guards, but because there was nowhere to

run..."

"That time, was your sleeve rolled up by any chance, so that your arm... What's going on? Since when were you the type to get a tattoo just because it's fashionable?"

"That's not it!"

According to Conrad, as soon as the owner of this carriage saw the scar on my left hand, he drove us, along with the straw, to an inconspicuous place. Then, at that place, we met up with a funeral services organization and they took over, pretending to transport the deceased out to the countryside.

The young woman who said the name Benila as she carved a hexagon into me with her short nails - it couldn't have been some kind of passport, could it? I never expected that it would serve that kind of purpose. Anyway, the shape of it kind of looks like a diamond.

Like before, when we were preparing to embark from the castle, in the courtyard there was a boy drawing on the ground. He was also loudly singing a familiar song. What song was that? What's the name of that song? Josak hadn't heard it before, but Conrad and I had an impression of it.

"That's right, Conrad, that song..."

"Because there were only two coffins, but three of us, we had to share. Do you feel uncomfortable? However, if it was me and Josak, we wouldn't even fit... What were you saying just now?"

"No, it's nothing."

"Moreover, if Your Majesty tried to share a coffin with Josak, the coffin lid wouldn't fit correctly because of his biceps. Although Josak was opposed to it, we finally decided on this."

At this point, a soft knock came from the other coffin. It was the sound of someone using a finger to tap the inside of the coffin. I also hit the board to my right to respond - don't worry, I'm all right.

"Your Majesty?"

Lord Weller's voice sounded very surprised. Because it's pitch black inside and I can't even see his face, I can only use his tone of voice and body temperature to guess.

"Is there something you wish to say to me?"

"I was only wondering if you were going to kill me."

The other's breath immediately stopped.

"Josak and I were both thinking the same thing."

The heartbeat under my arm starts to get faster.

"Something like that actually happened out at sea, so..."

"It's all right now."

In a voice that was so quiet that I couldn't tell if he was

breathing or speaking, he continued to say:

"There's no exit here, I won't push you."

"Exit?"

"Never mind, it's nothing. Anyway, I know this is not the time to invite domestic troubles."

"Ah, domestic troubles..."

Before these domestic troubles, I didn't know whether I could

consider him my comrade. We're Shin Makoku's representatives; Lord Weller is an emissary from Dai Shimaron. Not only that, but not long ago, he was even protecting Saralegui, who had been separated from his trusted subordinate.

His nationality and his stance regarding Shou Shimaron's King

Saralegui and the Emperor of Seisakoku's little brother Yelsi, both are different from ours now.

"Perhaps you don't consider me to be your comrade."

Hearing Conrad murmur these words, I thought to myself, "Ah~ That's actually not wrong." From the time he wouldn't take the hand I held out for him, I had already prepared my heart to accept that he will never return to my side. So, for me, the words that he's saying are really unexpected.

"Listening to the manner in which Saralegui speaks, it appears that he wants to keep you by his side. No matter how he thinks, he's still a seventeen year old young man. Traveling with you, someone who's not only the same age, but also shares the same position, must feel good. He appreciates you very much."

"Appreciates... When I almost died at his hand?!"

If we're talking about winning someone's friendship, that's a horrible way to do things.

"Because he was waiting, waiting for you to kneel before him and beg for forgiveness."

"As if I would become someone like that."

He chuckles, but then immediately recovers and adopts a solemn tone.

"Please promise me one thing."

"Promise you something? Depends on what it is. I won't do it if it's an unreasonable request."

Conrad shakes his head. His bangs keep rubbing against my cheek.

"This has to do with your safety. If those brothers have you trapped..."

He paused, and the rhythm of his heartbeat sped up to four beats per measure.

"Please do whatever you want to do. Don't hold back because of me

or Gurrier. That guy won't kill you, he definitely won't. Although he looks at others as if they were nothing but insects, he's different with you. He won't want your life - Sara won't harm you."

"Because he appreciates me? Oh, that's rich!"

I close my eyes to reduce the pain. I keep blinking - tears are slowly trickling out around my eyelids.

"If he appreciates me, then shouldn't he also appreciate you? Not long ago, you were responsible for looking after me, and in that bedroom you were even acting as his living coat hanger! How could he hate Lord Weller, huh?"

"But I know too much now."

I didn't ask him about what he knew.

Shou Shimaron's King Saralegui plans to make contracts between

Seisakoku and Shin Makoku that will be favorable to himself, and then he'll use that huge combined force to take control of the world. In his grand plan, there is no Dai Shimaron. Rather, he considers Belal's Dai Shimaron to be an enemy nation.

So, in regards to Dai Shimaron, Shou Shimaron already has domestic troubles. The situation is very urgent.

"So that's how it is. Saralegui plans to betray Dai Shimaron. But wait, knowing of this, you..."

"I'm sure Saralegui does not intend to let me go back alive."

"Won't let you...live... Ah, that hurts!"

A severe shake almost made me bite my tongue, but then the carriage stopped on some soft ground. Looks like this is the place where the funeral services guys open the coffins. I close my eyes first so the bright light won't blind me, but I guess it wasn't necessary.

It turns out that it was already night.

"Andrew-- Poggi Poggina--"

"Oh~ So there it is, there's the tomb."

"Take a stroll, Benila, take a stroll."

Benila is a guidebook?!¹ Seisakoku's language is really

hard to understand.

"Young master, it's good to see you well! Really, you've been so

rash even since you were a child."

Josak gets off the carriage and hugs me tightly. Although I'm being

flung back and forth by him like a shotput, I can still hear Conrad

step onto the soft, wet ground and speak.

"We've finally escaped. It hasn't come to being buried in this

graveyard."

He looks at the toes of his boots, then lifts his head to look

around at all the gravestones. The cemetery is full of mold, and

the wind blows mercilessly over our hair and cheeks.

I don't have any adjectives in my mind that are suitable for this

situation, so I just couldn't help but say, "Really? You must feel

very empty, Lord Weller."

"What?"

Josak lets out a surprised sound.

"Isn't that right? Not long ago, you two were still so close.

Didn't you even bathe and sleep together²... I didn't

see it, so I'm just guessing. And he's so pretty and cute, too.

Today you've suddenly become a different person... How can I

understand what you're thinking? You've done a total 180! I also...

Why do you guys have that kind of expression?"

Josak and Conrad are both looking at me like they've just been

punched in the stomach and had the wind knocked out of them.

Gurrier's mouth is even partly open.
And after I especially expressed concern for them, they really have
no manners.
"But anyway, here I'm the only king."
I toed the soft ground.
"It's okay if you call me Your Majesty sometimes."
...If I keep kicking, I'll probably dig up some bones.
Lord Weller still hasn't returned to his previous self? To return
to how things were in the past, simple and happy, is most likely
impossible. But at least now in Seisakoku, the three of us are
comrades.
I don't need to guess; I suspect I've hurt him.
But what made me even more surprised, when I discovered the reason,
was that my mind is a lot more relaxed than I had thought.
Suddenly, a dog's bark sounded in the distance, and the indistinct
light of nearby torches appeared. Is it the soldiers tailing us? Or
is it a guard on patrol who noticed something strange? Whatever it
is, we can't stay here long. We have to find a way out; run
somewhere to hide.
"Hurry, light the torch..."
"If we light it, we'll be discovered."
"Your Majesty, look!"
Josak points at the sky.
"Don't we also have the moonlight?"
I don't know what to do. A shadow darker than night flitted across
my vision. In this cemetery, so quiet that you could hear a pin
drop, there are other people besides us.
"Over here!"
The shadow gave a brief, piercing whistle to the pack of dogs,
making them even more excited.

"Hurry!"

That shadow lifted up its right hand as we passed by. Was that a signal to the dogs? We don't even have time to hesitate; we can only follow them. The leader is entirely shrouded in a cloak, but judging from the petite figure, I think it's very likely that this is a woman. If that's the case, then in this pitch black graveyard, we've met a life-saving goddess.

When we, because we climbed a wall, jumped over a ditch and ran for our lives until we couldn't catch a breath anymore, the goddess finally stopped moving. This is a place that stinks to high heaven, like a bog of some sort. Although there are two or three temporary dwellings set up, no matter how I look at it, this is uninhabitable.

There's light coming from the little huts.

Illuminated under the flame, I can finally see the appearance of our savior. Hidden under the leather cloak is the old lady who we met in the palace at dusk.

"I hear you're looking for Benila?"

She lifts up my sleeve, taking a look at the hexagonal mark that the girl on the freight carriage carved into me, then gave a satisfied grunt.

"I don't know who gave you this, but this is the symbol of the resistance. I am Benila!"

She says she's Benila?!

That's the important noun that was in Jason and Freddy's letter, and also the name that the girl on the carriage told us. I never thought that we would have met by chance, or actually that I would ever meet what I couldn't even figure out was a person or a

place.

We're really lucky. I want to forget how I almost died a few minutes ago, and just raise up my hands in joy. If it wasn't for the fact that this is the woman we met before, I would run over and give her a hug.

However, with that face and filthy gray hair peeking out of the cloak, it really looks like the old lady rolled around in a cart full of manure. Did Jason and Freddy want to tell me that for some reason or other, this old person is in danger?

Benila...hope. The letter said, "Benila hope."

"Old lady...sorry. Ma'am, you're Benila?"

Hearing me correct myself, she let out a laugh that was bolder than most women.

"It's fine! Young people, it's fine if you call me an old lady. No matter how you look at it, I'll never be a wholesome young lass, just a dirty old person. And weren't you the ones who rescued our comrade's child? Thank you. You have my gratitude. You are truly good people."

Josak's face hasn't looked so good for a while now. He just keeps scratching his head, not adding anything to our conversation. Why is he like that? What we've said should have touched some subjects that were enough to provoke some interest in the unmatched sex-related way his mind works, right?

"Your appearance is obviously that of foreigners, but you've unexpectedly turned up here. But unless you have official status, or are dependent on bribes, there's no way you can leave this island to go inland. There's no way you could be..."

As the old lady takes off her cloak, she vigorously puts her hands

on her hips. She turns and cracks her joints so loudly that it scares the three of us witless. Just seeing that petite body stretch, she's actually not humpbacked. It was only the outfit that made her look that way. But if I assumed she was young just by that, I would be wrong.

Because her face, neck, and arms are all full of wrinkles that are so deep they look like they were carved in with a knife. Judging by her face, she should be around 70-something years old, but with the brisk pace at which she walks, and the lively way she speaks, she doesn't seem like an old person at all. Also, she runs very fast.

Where in the world can we find a 70-something granny who easily jumps over tall walls?

"The rumored Maou's group of people?"

"How did you know about this?"

"What are you asking me?"

Benila gave me and Conrad a mischievous wink.

"Even if it's a trash heap or a toilet, they're all places where

one can hear the latest gossip! And what's more, I have contacts in the palace -- our parents were all slaves. Oh, right, right!"

She used extremely bony fingers to feel around in the bag by her waist, very carefully taking something out. From its shadow, it looks to be about as big as a 500 yen coin.

"First, to return the thing you dropped. This demon stone pendant is yours, isn't it?"

On her thin, wrinkly fingers hangs a leather cord, and she raises

it to let me see the blue demon stone. That stone, bluer than the sky, is glittering before me.

"Ha! Found it! This is great! I thought I'd never find it again,

and it's here!"

"Of course it is~ After all, it's an important thing. It must return to its true owner! 'Letting all things return to their original ownership, moreover, to their owners' hands' was my job in the past. But the me now, is just a lowly cart-pulling old woman..."

"Return to their owners' hands..."

I thought it over for a while, and was preparing to hand the demon stone over to Lord Weller. But before my hand could even move, Conrad already had his hand folded firmly over mine, and was gently shaking his head.

"Ah-- That's right."

Josak skillfully cleared his throat to interrupt us. However, his speech was not aimed at Benila, but at me.

"Young master, you're speaking in that foreign language that I can't understand again. What language is that? Old Calorian? If it's no trouble, would you translate it so Gurrier can understand? And what the stiff-backed old madam said, too, can you translate that?"

"Eh? We were just talking like normal, weren't we, Conrad?"

Lord Weller, who had become silent, just briefly said,

"Hazel..."

It's another person's name. He scrunches the scarred eyebrow, and the space between his eyebrows wrinkles exactly like his older brother. Josak and I, who have nothing to do with that name, can only stand to the side and watch.

"Hazel Graves, how can you still be here?"

Assorted Notes and Thoughts:

1) "Take a stroll" is apparently the name of a series of tourist guidebooks.

2) Ahem. This line originally confused me to no end, but now I believe it's referring to Conrad and Sara. O_O; oh,

Yuuri... You're growing up so fast... Well, while

he literally says "sleep together", that's kind of ambiguous. I

don't know if Yuuri meant it as in "sleep together" or "sleep

together as in doing the funky monkey".

...Hey, did anyone else notice how Yuuri seemed jealous of Sara? It

almost seemed like part of his hostility was because he felt that

Sara had stolen Conrad away from him. Or am I imagining things?

(Nah, Yuuri is soooo jealous. 'Cuz Sara's so "cute" and "pretty",

right? That comment was directed at Sara, right? I thought it was

Josak for a while, but that didn't make much sense, haha.)

I should really start at the beginning of this novel, but what's

here is really interesting. Josak seems to have been completely

absorbed into the harem, now. Yuuri isn't creeped out by his

crossdressing anymore, has gotten really close to him - much closer

than we see in the anime. I guess his wonder-biceps just took some

time to get used to, but Josak is now definitely a potential love

interest?

Meanwhile, Conrad and Yuuri? Teee~nsion. Aaa~wkward. But still with

that undercurrent of luff.